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like to hate you"*
From a Painting by John G. G.



GEORGE THORNE

By
Norval Richardson
Author of "The Lead of Honour," etc.

With a frontispiece in colour by
John Goss



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GEORGE THORNE

CHAPTER I

THE OPPORTUNITY

"GREAT God, man! It's a penitentiary offense!"

The young fellow who had just entered the outer office stopped short and listened intently.

"He is bound to find it out, sooner or later! A thing like this can't be kept dark forever! No, sir, — I'm afraid to go into it!"

Still listening, the young fellow walked noiselessly across the room toward the folding doors through which the voices came. Suddenly he stopped, realising that he was eavesdropping. Then another voice came, lower than the first; smooth and cajoling in its accents.

"It can't fail, Allston. I've planned every detail so perfectly that we can't help but win. Have patience enough to listen to the end. It's the opportunity of your life!"

"Yes — that sounds well; but if we are caught?"

The young fellow hesitated no longer. With a noiseless step he went to the folding doors and leaned against them so that no word might escape him. Possibly it was dishonest, what he was doing, he reasoned to himself; yet, if these men for whom

he was working were planning something that might carry them both to prison, was it not self-protection that he should know in time to sever his connection before the crash came — before he might, through his connection with them, suffer through a reflection of their crime?

The room in which he stood was intensely quiet. Only the sound of coal crackling in the stove and the occasional settling of snow against the window broke the stillness.

The voices were now pitched lower and sometimes dropped to a whisper.

He listened intently, but as acute as his hearing was, he was unable to catch the full drift of the conversation. A word of protest from Allston, now and then, as the scheme unfolded — sentences which he could not piece together — that was all. "Penitentiary offense — railroad — Stone Creek — big money" — what could he reconstruct from that and make definite enough to understand? The voices sank lower and lower. They must have almost finished their discussion now.

"Now for the plans of the railroad," came one of the voices in a louder key. "I have them in my grip. Where did I leave it? Oh, yes — in the other room."

The young fellow tiptoed to his desk and was just taking his seat as the folding doors opened and a man entered the room.

"Would you be kind enough to give me my grip," he said abruptly, giving the young fellow a rather intent look. "I think I left it in here. Thank you," when it had been handed to him. Then,

with another direct glance at the young man :

" Who are you?"

" George Thorne ; Mr. Allston's clerk."

" I don't think I remember seeing you here before. How long have you been in the office?"

" Three months."

" You like the work?"

" I am satisfied."

" H-m-m." The man looked at the young fellow thoughtfully, as if trying to reach some conclusion in regard to him. " How old are you?"

" Twenty-four."

Turning away abruptly, the man passed into the inner room, closing the folding doors carefully after him and leaving the young fellow with a strong impression of his striking personality, of his handsome face dignified by prominent black eyes and iron-grey hair, of his perfectly made clothes, the cultivated accent of his voice, and his unmistakable air of being used to the luxuries of the world. He had arrived that afternoon from New York and appeared to be the representative of the man who owned the mine, keeping up this office and employing the man Allston, as a sort of agency through which he controlled the enterprise.

The young fellow stood beside the desk where the other had left him, puzzling over the impression the man had made upon him and the certainty of his dishonesty, shown by the conversation he had half overheard. He had always thought himself quick at judging a man's character through his face, but this man had caught him beyond his depth. Was it possible to associate the evident wealth and

cultivation of this man with the dishonest scheme that had just been propounded? While he puzzled over the question he heard his own name mentioned.

"Allston — who's this young chap, Thorne?" came in Barton's deep voice. "What do you know about him?"

"Oh, has he got back? I sent him out on some business. Know about him — nothing at all. I met him in Denver a few months ago — he was working there in Brown's office. I got into conversation with him one day and found he thought he was not getting enough, so I offered him fifty dollars a month and he came here with me."

"Is he capable?"

"Yes — quite. He does his work well and thoroughly. Not only that — he's bright; reads a great deal — and keeps to himself. Thinks he's above the cattle here, I guess."

"Well — that's in his favour. H-m-m, I rather thought so. Queer eyes — ever notice them?"

"Eyes? No — what's the matter with them?"

The other hesitated a moment before replying.

"Oh, nothing — only they rather struck me when I first looked at him. They are really remarkable. I'll wager the fellow is capable of doing anything. People with such eyes as his are always either one thing or the other — saint or devil." Barton laughed easily. "It's a funny thing — I've never seen but two people with eyes like them, and the queer part of it is that Mrs. Livingstone is the other one."

"You mean Livingstone's wife?"

"Yes — of course you have never seen her. She was a great beauty — she still is for her age; and that young chap's eyes are identically the same — only hers are the angel's and his are the devil's."

"Oh, I've found him clever enough."

"Yes, that's just it — too damned clever. But let's get on with the work. These papers Livingstone gave me to bring out here and authenticate. They are the original maps that he told me he had not looked at for twenty years. Hullo! What's this? A scrap of paper — a newspaper clipping. By Jove — that's rather remarkable! It's one of the articles about his son — and I had just been thinking that that young chap, if he were clever enough and knew anything about the story, could easily pass himself off as the real son of Livingstone."

"His son? I thought you said he didn't have any children?"

"Did I? Well — he hasn't any now. He did have a son who disappeared when he was four years old — kidnapped, they supposed; at least, they never heard anything more about him."

"Is that so? I may have heard about it, but I don't recall any such story. Business drives other things out of a man's head."

"It's practically forgotten now — it was so long ago. The child was taken out by the nurse and disappeared while she was in the Park with him — during one of her flirtations, I suppose. The kidnapping was pretty well managed, for, although every newspaper in the United States was full of it, they never got even the slightest clue.

The case became pretty well noised about and I suppose the kidnappers lost their nerve and made way with the child — I'm sure I don't know. Livingstone offered one hundred thousand dollars for the boy's return — no questions asked. That ought to have tempted some one, I should think!"

"One hundred thousand dollars for a mere — baby!"

"Yes, Allston," and Barton's laugh came low and easy. "Sounds pretty stupendous to you, doesn't it? It didn't mean much to Livingstone, though — I mean the amount. The loss of the child broke him up completely. Of course I didn't know him well then — at least, not like I do now — but I've often heard people say how different a man he was before the child disappeared. I suppose the effect it had on his wife had a great deal to do with his breakdown. They say she was in a sanitarium for two years, and when she came out, her hair white, her beauty faded, her health gone, — it was enough to change him. It just goes to prove, Allston, that too many millions bring troubles in their wake. Take these people, for example, with an income many times larger than they can possibly spend, with several different homes, and yet miserable, health gone, and the only thing in the world they want out of their reach. As a matter of fact, Allston," he lowered his voice confidentially, "this little block that we are going to separate them from is so small to them that they will hardly know anything about it. Indeed, it's really in Mrs. Livingstone's name, and she hasn't any use for money now, except for her little excursions into charity.

You know how women always go in for that when they are disappointed. But — here is another digression. It will be midnight before we get to our subject, if we continue at this pace."

As they talked on the dismal twilight sank into night and the room in which the young fellow stood grew dark and extremely cold ; still he did not move from his desk. Barton's keen look had decided him to remain at a safe distance from the door ; besides, he had heard distinctly enough the story which, through Barton's suggestion, had suddenly jumped with such vital force into his mind.

Finally he heard a chair pushed back and the sound of some one moving about. When Barton and Allston entered the room, he had switched on the light and was emptying a bucket of coal in the stove. Going back to his desk he watched the man from New York slip into his fur-lined top coat and stand leisurely drawing on his gloves and looking about the room.

"Allston," he said, when his glance of inspection had taken in the shabby details of the room, "you will have to fix up this place better if you expect me to come out here often, and I suppose I shall be obliged to come four times a year, anyhow ; and I assure you, I do not want to work in this miserable place. I'll buy some furnishings on my way back and ship them to you."

His voice came quiet and easy, with just that touch of carefulness in its accent that kept it from sounding altogether natural. When he had finished speaking his glance rested again on the young fellow. Their eyes met for a moment, each holding the other's glance.

"I hope you will stay with Mr. Allston — or rather, that he will keep you," he said. "We need a bright, active fellow here, and if you show yourself capable I shall see that you do not regret it — and, I'm rather inclined to think you are capable." He moved towards the door. "Are you coming with me, Allston?"

"Yes — I'll go to the hotel with you. Put out the lights, George, and close up. I won't be back to-night."

George Thorne waited until the sound of their steps had died away and the room was quiet once more. Then, going quickly to the door, he sprung the lock, and stood looking about him, his eyes aglow with a strange excitement. What he had done, what he had heard, and greatest of all, the wonderful thought that had come to him as he listened, left him, after the two men had gone, with a feeling of utter weariness. He sank down in the chair before his desk and lowered his head on his outstretched arms.

He had been honest for twenty-four years, foolishly honest, honest in little things that were mere trifles to other people, yet observed so carefully by him, and still, with it all, here he was at twenty-four — poor, shabby, starving for all that his nature craved. And men like Barton and Allston, men who did not hesitate to rob and steal, and on a large scale too, were enjoying to the fullest the things which he had spent all of his life, so far, yearning for. But now — Suddenly he stood up and pushed the chair far back of him, and paced the floor. An almost terrifying temptation had gotten hold of

him. It was wild, almost unimaginable, but the idea had struck him with a dazzling force as soon as he had heard the words. They rang in his ears now, the slow, cultivated accent of Barton's voice insinuating them into his consciousness. "It's odd, I've only seen two people who had eyes like them — Mrs. Livingstone is the other one." "He did have a son who disappeared twenty years ago — when he was four years old —" "They never heard any more about him." "One hundred thousand dollars for the child's return — no questions asked."

Ah! it was all a delirium! What was he thinking about? The most impossible thing in the world, the wildest dream; the most impossible case a man had ever imagined. Yet — might he not succeed? There was nothing in the way. His aunt was dead, his parents — Again he stopped. Who were his parents? He had never seen them. He had been told almost nothing about them, indeed, there were no records of them that he knew of. They were pioneers who had gone West when the country was being settled, and had disappeared, like so many others, in that wild, barren country. Why not go to these people, whose lives had been ruined by the loss of their child, and tell them some plausible story? Yes, it must be plausible, but at the same time ingenuous and natural. He must insist on nothing — he must only create in them a desire that it might be true. Would not the resemblance Barton had spoken of be the clue upon which everything could be builded?

He stopped short in his striding, and stood before the mirror that hung above the washstand. His

eyes stared back at him out of the glass — grey eyes, the grey of black rather than blue, with a glow in them that was luminous and cold and hard. Dark lashes softened them and somewhat hid their real power, making the effect of their magnetism even more startling as they were flashed fully upon one. At this moment, under the glare of the light, they were deep violet, almost wild in their brilliancy — the influence of the new thought surging back of them.

He turned away with a short laugh. He was a fool to have let such an utterly impossible idea take hold of him. He could see the folly of it now; it was only the sudden thought that had thrown him out of balance. Besides, and he halted again in his striding, what he had thought of was only a sort of influence, an inspiration, a spell cast upon him by the men to whom he had listened. In their utterly immoral reasoning and planning, a suggestion had come to him even more dishonourable than their own. But now he saw, he understood, he had come back to himself again.

As he turned off the lights he shivered. The room had grown bitter cold, and in the street he struck out at a brisk walk to warm his blood. He never remembered having been so cold before; it must be the relaxation from the excitement of the past hour.

The supper hour was over when he reached his boarding house, and going into the dining-room he sat down at the long table where the remnants of a meal still remained, the stale odour of food, the soiled linen, the evidences of uncleanness striking him more forcibly than usual.

"You're late. There aint nothin' left," the woman of the house stated in her sharp, grating voice. "Les'n you wants a cup of coffee and some fried eggs."

"That will do," he answered quietly. "I'm not hungry to-night."

"You never is — 'cordin' to my notions," the woman answered, an antagonistic note in her voice and a glance at him that was unpleasant in its refutation of his manner.

"I guess you think this grub aint good enough fer you — aint that it?" She gave a short laugh, more a grunt of displeasure than a sign of mirth. "I've seen your kind before. You're all alike — haven't enough to pay for what you want, and always grumbling at what you have to take."

George looked away from her wearily.

"Have I ever complained to you, Mrs. Dodds?"

"No — you haint complained, but I can tell by your looks that it aint to your liking. I'd heap rather you'd come out with it and kick like the others. This way of keeping things all to yourself aint to my notion. I guess it's just as hard on me as it is on you."

George looked at her slowly, taking in the sordidness of her clothes, the utterly weary lines of her face, the loose expression of her mouth, and her coarsened, labour-ruined hands. He knew all these details so well, they had been with him always, just such surroundings. He wondered if they were to be with him until the end, and with this thought came the question if such surroundings did not affect one morally, if he would not eventually drift

down to that level. He asked himself again, as he had done almost every day of his life, where he had gotten his ideas of another existence when he had never seen it. Suddenly he pushed the plate from him and rose from the table.

The woman's voice rose to a higher pitch.

"I s'pose you think you're even too good for me to stand here and talk to you — aint that it?"

He turned sharply and faced the woman.

"No — it isn't that, Mrs. Dodds," he tried to look at her kindly. "It is not that at all. I am as sorry for you as I am for myself. Neither one of us can help it — I suppose."

The woman looked at him quickly, then her hand shot out and grasped his.

"That's all right — don't mind my quarreling with you. It's just that I'm worn out working — and I guess you are, too. Sit down there and I'll git you something right off."

"No — thank you. I don't believe I want anything. Thank you, though. Good night!"

The little room, ceiled with unpainted pine, cold, cheerless and holding the same odour of stale food as the one below, greeted him when he had gone wearily up the two flights of steps. He lighted the oil stove and held his hands over it, still keeping on his overcoat.

The bitterness of his own case swept over him, accentuated by the woman's words: "Worn out working." That was it. He was utterly weary of the struggle. The best of his life and his youth was slipping from him, and nothing had come yet — nothing but disappointment, nothing but failure

at every turn, nothing but constant striving and rebuff. Even the irresistible ambition that had always buoyed him up had lately begun to weaken. It had maintained itself falsely, and for nourishment was dying. He was beginning to see, too, how alone in the world he was, how, in the impetuous force of his ambition, he had denied himself the companionship of his fellows, feeling that it were better to have none at all than that of those he did not want.

With a rush the conversation of the two men came back to him, and in an attempt to conquer the train of thought that came with the memory, he lighted a lamp and picked up a book. On the flyleaf he read the name of the one who had given it to him; an old man, a schoolmaster, weazened, with shriveled eyes shrunken beneath a beetled forehead and shining through heavily rimmed spectacles. How strange that he should rise before him, at this crucial moment when the temptation was upon him to do something contrary to all the principles the old man had instilled into him! As, kind and sympathetic and relentless as ever, he took hold of the young fellow's thoughts, his bare little room on the side of the mountain rose before him, furnished with the meager necessities of life, the walls covered with cheap prints, unframed, of the world's best pictures, best architecture, best men — the influences that had helped him and which would keep any one, he had often said, in the right path. George had known him only one year, but that short period had been the turning point; it was to him like being caught by the shoulders and pulled out of a slimy pool,

placed on the bank and shown the way towards fresh, fragrant fields. Relentlessly as the ten succeeding years had struggled to throw him back into the rubbish heap of those about him, he had fought on and on and kept his standards polished by that memory.

He turned from the book in his hand to those on a narrow shelf, nailed against the wall — good books, all of them, some in frayed bindings, all of them showing years of use. The old schoolmaster had given them to him when he had been called to a distant place. "I want you to have them," he had said. "I have them here now," tapping his forehead. "But you will need them. One will help you when everything looks black; another will open your eyes to the beauty of things about you; one will instill into you a determination to reach out and soar higher and higher. And this picture, keep it too. It is a building I saw once when I was a boy, and had traveled half around the world. It always represented to me, through its Gothic pinnacles, a sort of truth that pierces through eternity." Such had been the seeds left by a spirit that had passed a few months in the midst of a rough mining community in the guise of a schoolteacher earning scarce enough to hold body and soul together. Yet, ten years after, the fragrance of the plant that had sprung from the sowing was pungent in the mind of the pupil.

George shifted his eyes to the pages of the book and began reading. It was useless. Between the printed lines Barton's words rose before him, crying out to him that all such teaching was theory; that

life to mean anything must be lived, and lived in the midst of surroundings that only one thing gave — money.

George threw the book from him, reached for his hat, and hurried down the steps and out into the night. The accursed fire of his temptation was racing through his veins once more.

It was bitter cold; that quiet, noiseless, stealthy cold of the West, that one does not become conscious of until it has reached one's marrow. He tramped along hurriedly, not knowing where he was going, nor caring, only conscious of the necessity of mastering the fancy that had so completely taken possession of him.

An hour later he passed the building in which Allston had his offices, and seeing a light burning in one of the rooms, he remembered that he had forgotten to turn it off. Slipping his key into the lock, he opened the door and entered the dark, silent building, and went directly to the office. Switching on the light, to go to the farther room, Barton's portmanteau caught his attention, left, as it had been, in a corner of the room. He grasped it and carried it to the table, inspecting, with a curious interest, the leather nameplate which hung from the handle, in which was slipped an engraved card bearing the owner's name. He fingered the clasp, then stopped, looking around the room furtively and listening intently. In the unbroken quiet of his surroundings he realised with a sickening sensation that, after all his efforts, the temptation was upon him once more, stronger than ever. With a determination that was both mentally and

physically exhausting, he turned away and went hurriedly into the next room, and with his hand already on the light to extinguish it, he saw a scrap of paper lying on the floor beside the chair where Barton had been sitting. He paused and looked at it steadily for a few moments, a look of amazement sweeping across his face. Then, very slowly, hesitating with each movement, he stooped and picked it up, sank into the chair under the light and held it out before him. His eyes were blurred for a while, his hands shook. It was impossible for him to read it for a long time. Now that the key-note of it all was in his hands, he felt all the strength and courage and honour of his youth slipping away from him forever.

After a time the words began to take form in his mind, and he began to read. There was a large headline at the top of the clipping, and beneath was the date —

“New York, May 3, 18—

The remarkable case of the kidnapping of Winston Livingstone's child has shocked the whole country. The enormous reward for his return has remained unanswered for over three months. The shock was not only felt by the friends of Mr. Livingstone and his beautiful wife, but has swept broadcast across our whole country. There is no parent who has not felt that he may be bereft of his child at any moment in the same way. Mr. Livingstone has requested every paper to publish a description of the boy, and it is hoped that none have overlooked it. The child was an unusual looking boy, his beautiful golden hair and dark grey eyes making

him much admired. The grief-stricken father and mother have the sympathy of the whole nation."

George Thorne put down the scrap of paper when he had finished reading it, then took it up again. His eyes almost devoured it, so intent were they upon it. Then he read it over again, twice, once aloud, the words echoing about the still room with a strange significance, making him rise from his chair, startled by the sound of his own voice.

Every detail seemed so complete now; before it had only been a wild idea, but with this paper in his possession, the whole scheme unrolled before him complete, rich in suggestion, and dazzling in its possibilities. And deeper still came the whisper of conscience telling him that it was not wrong, that, indeed, it could bring nothing but happiness to those who had lost their child and had always been waiting for his return. Even if he were an impostor, a cheat, lying through the whole incident, he saw the outcome as a great good, a happiness for him — and for them. The element of danger only enhanced the charm of the idea. He had risked many things before, and had always lost; he was hardily inured to failure. But this was to be the one stroke which was to count. It had come too easily not to mean success. All great things came suddenly, he had once read, and this, coming like a flash out of the last few hours, was to be his big opportunity.

He pulled a small rusty leather purse out of his pocket and emptied the money upon the table. He counted it carefully and seemed satisfied when he had slipped it back into its place. It was enough and more to get him to New York.

Throwing off all restraint, he allowed himself to dream of his success, letting it mount to such a dazzling height that he found himself in an indefinite world, feeling an almost joyous agony when he tried to define to himself that there would be no limit. No room was left now for the possibility of failure; imagination had blotted out that. Scenes of glory swam before him in every direction; and, then, suddenly mingling with them, came an enormous crowd of starving, careworn, suffering faces, in which he faintly traced a resemblance to his own. It was his past, he threw back his head and laughed aloud at the idea, coming back for a moment to tell him that it was dead forever.



CHAPTER II

THE FIRST STEP

ONE week later George Thorne reached New York. It was the first time he had been so far from the country he had always known, yet the novelty of the trip, the new scenes, and the rush of the life about him, lost their keener interest in the obsession of the adventure; for it had become an adventure to him now, pure romance, in which he let himself go free from all the restraining influences which had at first called to him to stop. With the demands of conscience quieted and with the determination to let nothing that might interfere with success enter his thoughts, his mind took in and assimilated everything that might lead towards that tremendous future he had planned. Many times he found himself rehearsing the conversation that would take place between him and Mr. Livingstone during their first interview, placing possible questions and his answers to them.

His train arrived late in the afternoon. After taking a hurried lunch and depositing his valise, he made a few inquiries and finally boarded a car that led towards the neighbourhood that he was seeking. Getting off near Central Park, he walked along the pavement under the trees which were swaying under their burden of ice and shimmering in the glow of electric lights. He walked slowly at first, looking

at the handsome houses across the street, and watching intently for the numbers. At last he saw the one he sought, and standing still before it, he took in all its details, the simple dignity of the façade, the heavy iron grille barring the main doors, the wide steps leading up to it, and the sunken windows through which the light filtered out into the cold night. As he stood there, evening came on, and the windows began to shine like eyes. He trembled slightly from the excitement, and moved on for a block, then found himself coming directly back to the house. It seemed impossible for him to keep his eyes from it. Once a policeman tramped by and looked at him curiously, which made him decide to walk on in the other direction.

He never knew exactly how long he stood looking at the house, but at the end of a certain time a sudden desire took possession of him to make his first step that night. He pulled out his watch and looked at it. It was half-past eight. With a quick movement, a tightening of the muscles and a straightening of the figure, he walked hurriedly across the street, up the steps, and pressed the button at the side of the storm-doors.

It had not been his first idea to go directly to the house. He had planned a scene to take place in Mr. Livingstone's office — a conversation in which he should state his case very plainly and clearly, and then go, leaving the newspaper clipping behind him. That was to have been the first move, a quiet awakening of interest on the other man's part, with an indifference on his that would strengthen the effect of truthfulness. Against his will, this other idea

had taken possession of him; yet, so forcibly had it come, that he had been carried to the door and had rung the bell before he had had time to think of what he should say.

The door within opened slowly, and he saw an impressive looking footman motioning to him to enter through the storm-doors.

"What is it you want?" the man asked, glancing at the young fellow, whose shabby top coat and wet boots and, most of all, ungloved hands, told plainly that he was not one of Mr. Livingstone's friends.

"This is where Mr. Winston Livingstone lives, is it not?" he said deliberately. "I wish to see him."

George looked directly at the man, his voice coming distinct and firm. He had seen the doubt of him expressed in the other's disrespectful glance.

The footman stood firm.

"Your name, please."

"Mr. Thorne."

His directness conquered the other's doubt, and as the footman stepped back and held the door open, he passed into the vestibule.

"Will you kindly wait until I see if Mr. Livingstone is at home to any one?"

At first the surroundings held George's attention, the small entrance hall of white marble, furnished architecturally with bay trees and teak wood furniture; then came the delicious sensation of tempered heat after the cold without; and when his glance had traveled on to the spacious hall that loomed beyond, he saw the footman returning.

"Will you walk this way, please?"

The man led the way through a vast hall, to

George a world of quiet shadows, in which softly shaded lamps gave a vague impression of magnificence, of rich-toned tapestries, of dark-veined onyx pilasters, of massive furniture and deep rugs into which his feet sank noiselessly. He followed the man to a corridor beyond, where the lights were even softer and the glow was reflected warmly in the polished mahogany of the floors. At last the footman paused before a door, and opening it without a sound, entered, spoke his name, then stepped back and motioned George to enter.

The room was dimly illumined, the principal light at that moment coming from a fire of logs that roared and crackled up the chimney, throwing a mellow tone across the dignified room. Walls of books met George's first glance, then pictures, and a striking bronze bust upon a verde antique pedestal; then, at last, a massive table which extended half the length of the room, on which in the wide circle of lamplight, he saw books in ancient leather bindings, magazines and newspapers, — the progressiveness of to-day mingling unobtrusively with the conservatism of the past. It must have been several minutes before he saw a man's head showing above the back of a chair which was placed before the fire.

George made a step forward and stopped. He heard the door behind him pulled to, yet it seemed that the man in the chair before the fire was still unaware of his entrance. He walked slowly by the table and stood a little way from the mantel, where the firelight fell full upon him, and waited there, holding his hat tightly clasped in his hands.

Finally the man looked up at him slowly.

"You wanted to see me?" His voice came quiet and low, his glance speaking complete lack of interest.

The moment George saw the man's face, all his wild dreams, the pitifully foolish plans of his accursed imagination faded like a dream.

It was a face outwardly passive, yet one felt at once that its passiveness was but the effect of circumstance. It was more the peacefulness of slumbering fire. No one would have called Winston Livingstone an old man, his large, alert, brooding black eyes denied that, yet there were heavy furrows in his face and his shoulders drooped slightly. Watching him in repose one would have noticed his long, thin hands moving suddenly every little while with the signs of a nervousness that suggested an impending diminution of his lifelong self-control. Among his daily associates, even among his few intimate friends, his face had always stood out from the others, distinguished by the impress of a tragedy which had left him indifferent to the conflicts which had ruined others. For, even with the handsome strength of his face, the dignity of his figure, the character and gentle breeding displayed so subtly in his dress and manner, there was indelibly stamped upon the man, through all these evidences of wealth and power and luxury, the sign of bitter success.

While Mr. Livingstone's eyes were questioning him, George was wondering if there were any use now to go on with the game. Before this man's magnificent intelligence he felt it would be fool-hearted; finally he saw the necessity of answering.

"Are you Mr. Winston Livingstone?"

The man bowed slightly.

"I am," he replied, still looking at George with polite indifference.

Suddenly, as if forcing himself to go through with what he had planned, George unbuttoned his coat and, pulling an envelope from his inside pocket, handed it to Mr. Livingstone.

"I have been waiting a year to bring this to you," he said quietly. "I was not able to come before."

The first lie was spoken.

Mr. Livingstone held the envelope in his hand, having glanced at it; then he looked back at George.

"You want me to open it?" he asked, a slightly bored note coming into his voice. He had already surmised a letter of introduction from some friend or distant relative, asking him to give aid to a struggling young man. This had been an almost daily occurrence for many years.

"If you will, please," George replied, unconsciously moving nearer to the warm blaze of the fire. He stood very still, his hands clasped tight behind him, the luminous look which had come there for the first time a week before surging once more into his dark grey eyes. It was the critical moment, he felt, and not one second did he take his eyes from the man's face as he tore the edge of the envelope and drew out the yellowed piece of paper. No nuance of the expressions which played across his face escaped George. He saw the indifference change suddenly to surprise, then, it seemed to him, a whole army of painful memories flashed across his features, leaving an utterly weary expression that was reflected throughout his figure.

Suddenly he crushed the paper in his hand and flashed a look so full of anger upon George that he fell back a step, startled out of himself. It was the look of one who had been touched in a wound and to whom the suffering had brought violent rage.

"Well," he said at last, his voice cold and hard, "why do you bring this to me?" His eyes searched George's intently. Then, for a moment, he seemed to have become aware of their brilliance, for a sudden look of interest flashed across his face.

George did not move from before the fireplace. The light back of him silhouetted sharply his tall, spare figure; the glow from a lamp seemed to have crystalised in the steady gaze he returned to his questioner.

"You are the man mentioned in the paper? You are the father of the child that was lost?"

Mr. Livingstone's eyes turned towards the paper in his hand, and smoothing out the crumpled folds which he had crushed in his anger, he began reading it again as if lost in the trend of his memories. George waited for him to speak again, to ask some question, to give him an opportunity to tell the other lie. He did not understand this sudden change in the man's attitude; a moment before he had shown violent anger, now it seemed that he had entirely forgotten George's presence. The minutes continued to drag along until the silence became unbearable. George took a step nearer Mr. Livingstone and looked down at him closely.

"I came here to tell you how this clipping got into my possession. Will you hear me now?"

The sound of his own voice startled him, it seemed

so unnatural and far away from all the standards of his youth. The dishonesty which had prompted the words appeared to him to have affected their sound, and in that moment he got an impression of the walls of books about the room re-echoing them and laughing back at him in derision — even looking directly into his conscience and sneering at him.

Suddenly Mr. Livingstone laid the paper on the table and looked up. Evidently he had thrown off the memory of the past, and with this mastery his face grew more energetic, his figure straightened, and as his voice reached George it sounded sharp and strident.

"You have spoken to me, young man," he replied, "about a subject that I discuss with no one — not even my wife. It is a closed book and belongs to the past. So why should I allow you to come in here from the street and talk to me about it simply because you have a clipping from a newspaper published years ago?"

As he finished he sat upright in his chair and faced George squarely.

"It is my right to speak to you about it. I demand that you listen to me."

The man's energy and force had brought a sweeping change to George. The antagonism of the other made him feel that he was in his accustomed field of fighting the world and every one in it, and the words had rushed to his lips with an impetuosity that was felt by Mr. Livingstone.

"Well, go ahead," the older man said, relaxing his upright position and leaning back in the chair. "But be brief."

George laid his hat, which he had held until this moment, in one of the large chairs; then he moved back towards the fire, his hands clasped behind him. He did not hesitate one moment. The words had been carefully rehearsed; he was quite prepared for this question; it was the only one, so far, that had come as he had planned it.

"A little over a year ago, the woman who brought me up — the one I thought my aunt — died. She had been ill a long time. I was not able to be with her much, as the position I had at that time kept me at work until late in the night. We were desperately poor. I only made ten dollars a week, keeping books at a small store in Benton, Colorado. It was hard to make ends meet on that amount."

George drew a long breath, then continued, his voice lower and not so firm.

"I suppose it is difficult for you to know what that means, to realise that when one is without friends and money there seems to be neither in the world. It was that way with me. . . . The day she died she made me bring her a little tin box, which she kept locked in her trunk. When I opened it at her direction, I found that it contained that scrap of paper which I have given you. Then she told me that she was not my aunt — that she was no relation to me at all. Afterwards, she gave me that clipping, and said that it would help me find my father."

Suddenly the older man made a movement as if to rise from the chair, his eyes burning into George's.

"Wait — that is not all," George hurried on. "She told me that her husband had made her take an oath that she would never tell me until she was

dying — otherwise, it would bring her untold harm, perhaps carry her to prison. He told her that I alone must find my father — that both of them being dead and out of the way, it could be safely left to me to work it out."

The words ended, the silence of the room deepened, and the two men faced each other. George felt the man's eyes searching into his inner consciousness. It was a silent battle between them, and he felt himself thrill with the conflict. It was now a question of the man's strength or his own, as to which could hold out the longer; but this silence, this deathly stillness that followed his words in the big room troubled him. He found himself talking again to gain strength.

"What truth there is in it, I do not know — I do not pretend to say. I only know that I have worked without ceasing ever since I knew this to get enough money to come to you to ask for advice. You have the means to find out if there is anything in it — I have not."

Mr. Livingstone still stared into George's face with an intensity of gaze that deepened after he had finished speaking. It was the absorbed look of a man who is asking himself questions and who sees only doubt answering hope. At last he lowered his eyes and gazed back into the fire, a slight sigh escaping him as he shook his head.

"It is very like all the other stories that I used to hear," he said slowly, his voice lowered and showing fatigue. "I have heard them a thousand times!"

George started with a tingling pain that shot through him. He knew now that he had failed,

and with the excitement of the struggle gone, he felt himself sway towards a chair and lean heavily against it.

"You mean? — " he heard his voice as if from a distance, husky and weak.

"That there is not a word of truth in what you have said."

"You think then that I am lying?" Again his voice came utterly weary.

"I know it."

George glanced about the room once more, drawing its warmth deep into his lungs as he thought of the intense cold that was awaiting him without. Then he drew himself together and reached for his hat. Even by employing dishonesty he was not to succeed, he said to himself, his thoughts traveling back to Barton and Allston. Then came a revulsion of feeling, an intense rage that caught him in its grip and held him firm. If he could not succeed, neither would he let them. Then, flash upon flash, came a series of thoughts, in which he saw himself going back to them and demanding part of the booty or threatening exposure. Step by step he saw himself falling deeper and deeper into the bottomless pit of dishonour.

With a glance at Mr. Livingstone, who was still looking away from him, and with the thought that in him had rested the last chance of his salvation, he started towards the door. With his hand on the knob, he heard Mr. Livingstone's voice calling to him.

"Stop! Where are you going? Come back here."

CHAPTER III

PHANTOMS OF HOPE

GEORGE stopped at the door and turned. In the tempest of his thoughts he took no count of words.

"Is there something more you wish to say to me?"

It was a full minute before the answer came.

"Yes. You give up the game quicker than most of them. Why don't you try some other tactic?"

The question puzzled George. He felt that his wit, his command of himself, had left him forever. With the naturalness that had come to him his voice grew unsteady and struck a softer note.

"I don't understand. I have told you all I know. You do not believe it. There is nothing more to say."

"There is a great deal more to say. Where did you get this idea?"

Mr. Livingstone rose from the chair and stood looking at George across the room, his tall figure towering full of some hidden power, some method by which a confession was to be drawn out of the young fellow. George's lips tightened with the assurance of a new struggle.

"Had you actually hoped to persuade me that you were my son?"

"I had expected you to believe what I said."

"If what you say is true," this in a tone that was different from anything that had shown in the man's

voice before, and which brought to George the onrush of hope revived, "if what you say is true, I suppose you have been living on this hope for a long time?"

"I have thought of nothing else."

"But did it not strike you as absurdly flimsy?"

"I only thought of it as being true."

"And what did you expect me to do?"

George made a step towards him, searching his face for some clue to the meaning of this change of manner. His thoughts, his power of reasoning, his surroundings, — all grew blurred in the upheaval of the last few minutes, and he found himself struggling to steady his voice.

"I thought you would be interested enough to look into my case, at least to try to find out something definite. It seems to me only right that you should help me."

His weakness made his voice pleading and full of the sincerity that his acting had failed to give it. The ring of truthfulness brought Mr. Livingstone across the room towards him, and taking him by the arm, he almost pushed him into a chair beside the table.

"Sit down — there," he said, tilting the shade of the reading lamp so that the light shone full into the young fellow's face. In its brilliance George's features stood out clear-cut; the high, broad forehead, the regular nose delicately modeled, the large mouth with the firm line of the lips, and the dark grey eyes in which glowed an unusual intelligence.

Nothing escaped Mr. Livingstone as he stared down at the young fellow, not even the slight grey-

ness at the corners of his mouth and beneath his eyes that showed exposure to cold and want of nourishing food. He saw also the rough hands, the uncared for though clean nails, the shabby, threadbare clothes; all these he took in, returning to dwell upon the face with its weary expression, with the deep circles beneath the eyes. Finally he moved away from the table and pressed the bell near the mantel. The footman appeared almost instantly.

"Bring some whiskey and soda, with biscuits or sandwiches — at once." He hesitated a moment, then added, "Mrs. Livingstone has ordered the motor for the opera?"

"Yes, sir."

"For what time did she order it?"

"Half after nine, sir. It's just nine now."

"Tell her that I shall not be able to go with her — that I shall call for her there later."

When the footman had left the room, Mr. Livingstone sat down in a chair opposite George, the table between them. Leaning back in his chair, his hands resting on the arms, he looked at George again, less intently, with a kindly expression full of keen interest.

"Tell me more about yourself," he said. "What did you say your name was?"

"George Thorne."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

"Can you remember much of your early childhood?"

"Oh, yes — I think I remember it all."

"Will you tell me something about it?"

George hesitated after the quick fire of questions. He was still trying to understand what it was all leading towards — this sudden interest, this almost kindly manner, all of these questions.

"I hardly think it would interest you. It is all so — bare."

"I shall be deeply interested."

The footman entered the room with a silver tray containing a decanter, soda water and a plate of sandwiches. Placing it upon the table, he looked inquiringly towards Mr. Livingstone

"That is all — you may go."

Mr. Livingstone rose from his seat, and selecting a tall glass and a decanter, poured out some whiskey, filling the glass to the top with soda water. Then he pushed the plate of sandwiches towards George, at the same time handing him the glass.

"I noticed you looked a little pinched and cold. Perhaps you have been exposed to the weather. Drink that — and take a sandwich or two. I think it will make you feel better. Don't hurry — take your time."

He walked away from George, going to a desk across the room, where he selected a cigar, and lighting it carefully, went to the fireplace and stood before it, his hand resting on the high shelf, one foot on the fender. He stood this way a few minutes in deep thought, then turned away restlessly and went back to the desk, where he picked up a sheet of paper and a pencil, and, bringing them to the table, sat down again opposite George.

Meanwhile George had drunk from the glass handed him, and, as the warming influence of the

whiskey rushed through his veins, his glance wandered more quietly about the room. He began to feel the impress of each detail, the golden tints of the leather-hung walls, the surrounding shelves of books mellowed into the soft colours of age, the perfection of everything, and most of all, the chimney piece, which had graced some French château for many centuries and had at last been carried far away to a new country where it still looked down upon its surroundings with a quiet expression which seemed to say it had seen all the gaiety of life, all the ambition, all the sorrow, as it disappeared in one generation to be renewed in another. The red glow which the carving of its world-old face caught from the fire gave it the semblance of age and wisdom, and George, in his wandering thoughts, got the impression that it was still alive with the life of those who had gathered for centuries about its hospitable hearth. In an indefinable way he felt the owner of the surroundings in each of these details — they seemed so perfect a setting for the man of whom it was all a part.

Meeting his eyes again after the separation of the last few minutes, George felt a deep craving sweep over him to have the privilege of associating with such a man. It came to him as a surprise. The idea that these people might take any hold on his emotions had not entered his thoughts. So far he had merely looked upon them as tools by which an end might be reached; but here, almost at the very beginning, he felt the stir of real liking for the man. He represented so perfectly what he had created as an ideal towards which he was going to strive; and

even as he thought of this the conviction swept over him that it was not a thing that a man accomplished alone, but more the result of generations of gentle breeding. What could he, out of the very dregs of inheritance, hope to gain in one short lifetime?

"Now — you feel better? I thought you would," came the low voice, gentle now and kind in its encouragement, as he saw the flash of thanks from George's eyes. "Do you feel up to talking now of what you have done — of your past life?"

"I hardly know where to begin. It has always been such a fight," George began slowly, realising now that he was going to tell the truth, lead him where it would. "I am only twenty-four, and yet it seems that I have lived years and years — each of them made up of work and poverty. But I have always been ambitious — perhaps that is what has saved me; though it did no good, for I always seemed to fail at everything. Yet somehow — the idea I had would get hold of me again and drive me on. When the woman I thought was my aunt died, I thought I had come to the end of everything."

In the warmth of the room, in the encouraging blaze of the fire, George felt his strained nerves relax. The effect brought with it the feeling that he was fighting no longer, that he was expressing all that he had felt before and had passed through.

"Did you care for this woman so much as that?" came Mr. Livingstone's voice, calm and low.

"No, — I hardly think I loved her. It was more a pity I felt for her — brought about by her need of me. We did not see each other much. I was at

work all day, and at night when I came home she was in bed, and I would spend the evenings alone, reading."

"You have read a great deal?"

"All the books I could get hold of. In a small Western mining town there is not much literature."

"What was your work?"

"I was bookkeeper in a small store."

"You had no sympathetic companions?"

"Only one — an old schoolteacher who spent one year in Benton. He took a liking for me. I used to go to him at night to be taught, and I think he rather enjoyed playing on my sensitive mind. I was fifteen that year, perhaps the time when things stick in a boy's mind, and he succeeded in keeping going the taste I already had for reading."

"Then you studied as a child?"

"Always. It was rather odd — wasn't it? I have always looked upon it as a sort of inheritance — something inside of me that didn't find what it wanted in its surrounding. Even to me it was strange — yet I felt it driving me on all the time."

"And this man — this schoolmaster — helped you along?"

"Yes — I think he gave direction to what was before only chaotic, though I developed differently from what he had hoped."

"You mean —"

"That he was satisfied with his life spent with books — I wanted to apply what I got from them. I wanted tangible results from my studies — worldly success, I suppose you would call it."

Mr. Livingstone lowered his eyes thoughtfully.

"H-m-m—," he began after a slight pause.

"Did you have no other friends?"

"None that I thought could help me attain my object."

"What was that object?"

George shifted his glance from the penetrating eyes of the man before him. Looking across the table and into the fire, his face remained passive for a while, the tenseness of its lines softening into the dreamy look of the imaginative mind. It was almost as if he had forgotten his surroundings.

"It is hardly yet formed — my ambition," he began. "Most of all, I think it was to get above the people I was with. Those about me never seemed to understand me; even my aunt thought I was foolish, almost half witted, in sticking to my books. She said they would never be of any use to me, as I was fixed there. She was right, too — only I never told her that I was working towards something different — something better, higher than she could ever understand. At that time," and his eyes flashed out towards Mr. Livingstone with the cold, hard glitter that had often made people turn away from him as if from something unpleasant, "at that time I got the idea that the country of my childhood was like what my life was going to be — bare and cold, with snow-covered mountains on all sides. This notion grew on me, even as a child, and with it came a resolve to accept the world as such, to treat everything in it as if they were trying to bind me down, to crush out all my longing for all that was fine and big in life. I think, perhaps,"

his voice shaking slightly, "that idea may have twisted me a little. Don't you think that's likely?"

He turned back to Mr. Livingstone, and found him still watching his face intently.

"Perhaps so," came the easy response, "but we all have that experience, more or less, at some period of our lives. The only difference is the setting and the intensity of it. But continue."

It was all so easy to George now. It was like speaking his thoughts to a listener, who, through sympathy, made him express himself well.

"Sometimes I used to go to Denver — the only city I have ever known. I saw there all I seemed to be working towards, and yet, when I tried to break away from my poverty and take a step up, I always came to the high wall that success builds about itself. My poverty — my shabbiness — made others suspect me. Those who have all the comforts of the world about them do not want poor folks around — they do not want to be shown the other side. If they do not know it they won't have to do anything about it."

For a moment Mr. Livingstone looked away. It was as if he had felt a lessening of interest. When his words came they voiced this impression.

"Perhaps you have read too much socialism."

"Socialism? — No. I am only speaking of my own experience." George's voice had grown stronger now, and as he continued his hands gripped the arms of his chair. "I've known all of this since I was a child. Can you imagine a little boy without clothes enough to keep warm, trudging through the snow to buy a bucket of coal; then, when it was gone, and

the room was cold, going back to the coal yard where he begged, begged, begged, for more to keep him from freezing to death? . . . Can you see him being cursed and kicked out, and then standing outside, shivering and whimpering and trying to understand what it was that placed the comfort there before him, yet forbade him to touch it?"

As if under the control of his memories George rose from the chair and crossed the room towards the mantel. His hands locked together and pulled apart again, and his head sank a little forward with the intensity of his feelings. When he looked up, the burning, luminous expression was in his eyes. He came nearer to Mr. Livingstone, who had turned in his chair and followed him with thoughtful eyes, and, leaning against the table, looked fearlessly down into his face.

"Maybe you have read of such cases in this fine house here, and said they were lies — cock and bull stories. But I know them — have known them almost every day of my life. And if you had gone through them as I have, you too would have torn down and trampled upon every enemy to your getting away from such misery. This is the feeling that makes men murderers and drives women from desolate homes into the street; this it is that makes a man decide to crush all that stands in his way."

With one hand upon the table, his slim, slight figure responding sympathetically to the onrush of the words, his face illumined and glowing with colour, George was at that moment the embodiment of the fire and energy of youth. The magnetism of his strong personality swept over the older man and

kept him silent long after the words had died away.

Mr. Livingstone relighted his cigar which had gone out, and blowing the smoke slowly about him, settled back in his chair. A little later he turned towards George, who had gone back to his chair and sat down.

"By what you have told me, do you mean that you yourself have done something dishonourable?"

George started, taken unaware in his train of thought.

"Why no — what do you mean?"

"I mean — have you done anything criminal — anything for which the law can punish you?"

"No, I have not," came the firm reply, jarring the intense stillness of the room.

Mr. Livingstone turned in his chair, drew the sheet of paper towards him and picked up the pencil.

"You say your name is George Thorne, that you lived, up to a year ago, in Benton, Colorado." He wrote down the names as he spoke them, and then asked, "What was your aunt's name?"

"Ellen Thorne."

Then followed question on question, the names of the people he had known in Benton, the ones he had worked for, the schoolmaster, and many seemingly insignificant queries, the answers to which Mr. Livingstone wrote down carefully. When he had finished, the last question being George's present location in New York, he pushed back his chair and stood up, holding the newspaper clipping in his hand.

"I shall have to ask you to leave this clipping with me. You have no objections?"

George rose from his chair and crossed to where Mr. Livingstone stood. A thousand ideas had suddenly flashed into his mind that all this sympathy and interest had been employed only to lead up to this point — this getting out of his hands the clipping that might prove something. Once out of his possession it could be destroyed in one second, and the case closed forever. His experience had not taught him to have confidence in others.

"You are asking all that a man can of another," he began carefully. "That paper has never been out of my possession since it was given to me. You must realise what you are asking of me."

"I do," Mr. Livingstone replied, meeting his look squarely. "But, if we are not to have any confidence in each other, it is hardly worth while to begin — is it?"

With their backs to the door, neither of them saw it open, nor was conscious of the woman who had stopped on the threshold. Her hair, silvery white, and arranged softly about her delicately beautiful face, blended perfectly with the colour of her eyes, which were dark grey and wonderfully gentle and sweet. In the whole effect of her presence there was the refinement of gentleness and beauty, showing subtly in the delicacy of her features, in the soft blending of the colours of her gown — an odd shade of old blue, showing beneath a wrap of lace and chinchilla — and in the vague air of youthfulness saddened into maturity.

She remained quite still in the doorway and watched George as he stood before Mr. Livingstone, the brilliance and strength and glow of ambition

still illuminating his countenance, making him even more strikingly handsome than before.

"I know that you can't realise, though, what it means to me," he was saying, "because, even if there is a possibility of its proving that you are my father, even then it will not mean to you what it does to me. When a man has lived twenty years with a certainty that his child is dead, I suppose it cannot represent much to him. But to me it means everything. It means that I have the world open to me. It means — Great God! — don't you see — you can make anything you want to of me!"

Suddenly George became conscious of a woman coming towards him. She passed quickly, almost noiselessly, between him and Mr. Livingstone, and came directly up to him, staring into his face with a strange intentness. Even in that first moment he thrilled with the knowledge that her eyes were peculiarly like his own.

Still searching his face, her eyes glowing full into his, George heard her low voice come, sweet and oddly pathetic.

"I heard him say that if something proved that he were your son —"

Mr. Livingstone was beside her in a moment and had hold of her arm, attempting to draw her away from George.

"It was nothing, Constance. You mistook his meaning."

"No — no, Winston," she hurried over the negation, not once taking her eyes from George's face. "No — no, I heard distinctly. Don't keep it from me, Winston." Her voice dropped to a whisper,

and she took a step nearer to George. "Tell me — oh, please tell me!"

Mr. Livingstone tightened his grasp on her arm.

"I shall tell you later. So far — there is nothing certain to —"

"Nothing certain — then — there is something. Ah!"

She swayed unsteadily, her eyes still searching George's. The next moment he made a step forward and caught her as she swooned towards him.

CHAPTER IV

A MOTHER'S INTUITION

MRS. LIVINGSTONE opened her eyes slowly. The room was very quiet, and, resting her head on her husband's shoulder and looking into the fire that had settled down into smouldering embers, she felt an unaccountable peacefulness in the surroundings. Something wonderful had happened, she felt, yet in the gradual return of consciousness she sought no explanation of this impression, letting it come to her gently out of the mist of memories.

In the moments of waiting, the long stretch of her disappointed life unfolded before her; day after day in which one prayer was constantly upon her lips — the prayer that her child might come back to her. At first she had felt that she could not stand the terrifying thought that he was still living and yet beyond her reach; her mind had reeled under this realisation, and through weeks of delirium she had experienced a measure of relief; then, very slowly she had come back to the world about her and to the endless waiting that must be endured. Hope had crowded upon hope, disappointment always crushing it down; then came the agony of realising that there was no truth in the many stories that had been told to her by people who thought she might find enough resemblance in their child to accept him as her own. Yet, through it all, she had seen clearly,

she had never once been mistaken, she had even understood the feeling that had prompted one woman to offer to give up her child for the benefit that would come to him through the change. Months had drifted into years, and at last she and her husband had silently agreed to lift up their heads and bear the sorrow as best they could.

"It must be borne, Constance," he had said to her at the end of two years of useless inquiry. "Be brave with me, you for my sake, I for yours; we can help each other in that way, and perhaps God will take pity on us and send another to take his place."

"No other one can take his place, Winston," she had answered, shaking her head sadly. "I could not feel the same towards another child, knowing that he, my little baby, was out in the great world among strangers, surrounded by people who do not care for him, perhaps not having even the daily necessities."

After that, the silence of years wrapped itself about the subject. They took up their lives again as best they could, the man seeking forgetfulness in work that doubled an already large fortune, the woman finding in hope a force that steadied her, a luminous beacon which she knew she would follow to the end.

Suddenly she trembled with the memory of the last hour and started up from the sofa, then fell back weakly.

"Winston!" her voice shook vibrantly, "where is he? Was I dreaming?" Her eyes anxiously searched the room.

Mr. Livingstone nodded to the maid, who had been sent for, to leave the room. Then slipping his arm about his wife, he kissed her gently.

"He has gone, Constance. I asked him to go."

"Gone? What do you mean?"

"When you fainted I told him he had better go. You were too weak to stand the shock. I did not want him to be here when you regained consciousness."

"But, Winston — he may have gone forever — I —"

"No, I know where he is. He left me his address."

She settled back more easily and looked searchingly into her husband's face.

"Winston," she whispered, "tell me — don't keep it from me — is he our child?"

"I don't know yet, Constance," he answered slowly, considering his words to keep from ruining the happiness which he had seen coming into her face for the first time in the desert of years. "I don't know. Will you listen to me calmly if I tell you what he has told me?"

She listened, without interrupting him once, to the end. Then, as if with some psychological instinct, that day twenty years before rose before her sharply distinct. She saw the terrified nurse rushing into the room without the child, she felt again the terror of that first interminable night of waiting, then the child's face grew more distinct before her, the bright grey eyes sparkling with purity and innocence, the rosy cheeks, the light curly hair. Again she trembled.

"Winston — his eyes — I knew there was something!"

Mr. Livingstone started at the words.

"His eyes!" he repeated after her. "His eyes!" Suddenly he controlled himself with the knowledge that too much was at stake to let his wife think that he considered the story seriously. Although recounting what George had said to him, he had been careful to dwell upon the lack of facts. But his wife's quick discovery caught him off his guard. From the beginning he had felt something familiar in the young fellow's presence, and through his wife's words had come the explanation. He moved across the room in the grip of strong excitement. He knew now that George Thorne's eyes were remarkably like his wife's — a resemblance baffling in its elements of similarity and difference.

When he turned back towards her he stopped short, startled by the expression of her face. There was a bright colour in her cheeks, her lips were curved into a smile, her eyes were full of a new-found happiness. She had grown young again in a few minutes; twenty years seemed to have dropped from her. He went towards her impetuously, surprised out of himself, and, sitting down beside her, he took her hands in his.

"Constance — what is it?" His voice shook. "I don't understand."

"Ah — don't you see? How can you help but see? Winston — the end of our waiting has come."

He dropped her hands slowly and rose again. It came to him then, more forcibly than ever before, what the loss of her child had meant to her. In the

expression of her happiness he saw also the great danger that lay before him; yet, even in the duty that the doubtful situation forced upon him, he felt a resentment towards anything that should make him say something that would rob her face of its revived beauty.

"Constance," he said at last, very slowly, very carefully, "don't go too fast. There is nothing certain yet — indeed it is quite the other way."

She smiled at him in answer.

"My instinct tells me I am right, Winston. Do you think a mother's instinct can be wrong?"

"It is not that, Constance; you are mistaken. It is your desire for it to be true that it has made it so."

"Even so," she was still smiling, "anything that will make it true — call it what you will."

"But there is so much to find out yet."

"Well — let us begin at once. I must see him to-morrow — early — give me his address. I am going to him."

He sat down beside her and took her hand in his.

"Constance — you must let me work this out. It is too serious for us to let sentiment carry us away."

"What is your plan?"

"He told me about his life out West, the town he lived in, and what he had done out there. Barton is out West now. I am going to telegraph him all that we know, and tell him to go to Benton, to see if what this young fellow has told us is true. There should certainly be some record of the people who brought him there. We are bound to find out some-

thing. But — until then — I don't want you to do anything. I don't want you to let yourself think that it may be true. Will you promise me that?"

She waited a moment after he had quite finished, then, putting her hands up to his face, she drew it down close to hers.

"Dear, dear Winston, will you always be a silly boy?" She kissed him and smiled happily. "Do you think I could sit here at home, knowing that my boy was in the same town, only a few streets separating us, and yet not go to him? What you ask is impossible! I am going to him to-morrow morning."

Mr. Livingstone looked away helplessly. Then his face quickened with a new solution of the problem.

"If you will not promise me that, Constance, will you do this — go out to Benton and meet Barton? Together you can look into the case."

"And not see him before I go?"

"Yes — not see him until you are satisfied that he has told us the truth."

She was silent a while, and then looked up resolutely.

"Well — if you think I am wrong," already her face was losing its glow, her voice expressing the creeping in of disappointment, "I shall do as you say." Then quickly, "But I must go at once, — to-morrow."

"Yes, to-morrow," Mr. Livingstone's face brightened, and he stood up energetically. "Once there, you can judge for yourself, and I know that you will feel as I do in the morning. Ah — I am glad,

Constance, that you have trusted me." He rang the bell beside the mantel, and when the footman had entered, continued, "Send a motor to the front and bring me my heavy overcoat." Then turning back to his wife, "I am going to ask Mildred to make the trip with you. I will find her at the opera — will I not?"

Mrs. Livingstone followed him to the door, and out into the hall. When he had pulled on his top coat, she put both arms about his neck.

"Tell Mildred everything, and tell her to come to me early in the morning."

Mr. Livingstone entered the box during an *entr'acte* and pushed his way abruptly through the group gathered there towards a young woman sitting at the front. Her back was towards him, the full curve of her splendid shoulders and the outline of her charming profile silhouetted against the lights of the auditorium. When she heard him speak her name she turned quickly, and the dark, rich colouring of her face deepened with pleasure as she met his glance.

"I am so glad you have come," she said quickly. "Where is Aunt Constance?" Then she stopped and looked at him, half rising. "Something has happened! What is it? Your face —"

"Yes — I must speak to you alone. Will you excuse Mrs. Braeme for a few moments?" he added, turning courteously to the others. "I shall not keep her long."

Outside the box, he led her down the corridor to a seat where they might talk undisturbed.

"A remarkable thing has occurred to-night," he went on hastily when the young woman was seated beside him. "A young man came to the house with a rather plausible story that leads up to the idea of his being my son."

Mrs. Braeme's hand touched his arm quickly

"You mean there is a possibility —"

"Yes — a bare possibility. Of course it may all be a lie — a trumped up story, with enough truth in it to make it appear plausible. I don't know yet what I think — only — somehow — against my will I am deeply interested."

"And Aunt Constance?"

"She came into the room before I was aware of her presence, and heard a part of what he was saying. You can imagine what it meant to her. And Mildred," his voice dropped into a lower tone vibrantly expressive, "if you could see the change in her already! It is that which has thrown me out of balance. I hardly know my own thoughts now."

The young woman rose from the seat.

"Take me to her at once. Is she ill?"

"No — no. You don't understand. It is not that at all. It is her happiness — a wonderful change that has taken place in her. She is almost like she was twenty years ago."

Mrs. Braeme sat down again slowly. Spreading out her fan in her lap, she waited for him to continue.

"She is going out West to-morrow, to Colorado. Barton is there now, and I am going to telegraph him to meet her and make investigations. The boy came from out there. I want you to go with her."

Can you leave to-morrow? There is nothing to keep you from going?"

The young woman slipped her arm into his, her hand pressing affectionately against him.

"There is nothing to keep me from going, Uncle Winston," her voice came low and beautifully modulated, "and even if there were I shall not let it interfere. I shall do everything I can to help you both. I know what it means to you — and you must know, too, how deeply I hope that it may be true."



CHAPTER V

A JOURNEY OF LOVE

THE short winter days made the gradually shifting scenery almost abrupt in its sudden changes. The level, cultivated country of the East had rapidly changed into gentle mountain slopes, and before the end of the first day everything had taken on a new aspect.

Then came the level country again, a long stretch of lakeshore, a huge, noisy, smoky city, and again, after many hours, limitless stretches of snow-covered fields, endless in their uninteresting continuity. Finally, in the clear blue distance, the setting sun gleamed for a moment on a magnificent range of mountains, then the night swallowed up this promise only to fulfill it amply on the morrow.

The train had zigzagged across deep gorges, making seemingly endless detours, slowly dragging itself up wonderful inclines for the most part of the day, yet the sun was still shining brightly when it finally stopped, and the conductor, in his nasal voice, called out "Benton! All out for Benton!"

Two women rose from their seats and made their way from the train, followed by a trim-looking maid. Once on the platform they stood still, completely surprised into admiration and awe of the scene before them.

Directly leading away from the station was a nar-

row mountain road. On either side of it were small, rough buildings, giving the appearance of hasty work rather than solidity or comfort. Most of them were unpainted, save for glaring signs and advertisements upon their yellow pine sides. Long groups of one-story buildings stretched on either side — the tenements and cabins of the miners. About this huddled mass of homes was an atmosphere of depression, cheerlessness and utter dreariness, and when one had looked down the road between the houses and had seen the valley formed by the converging snow-covered mountains, it was not difficult to realise the cause of the impression. The scenery was magnificent, but barren of everything that makes warmth and life. In the appalling heights, in the sombre shadows of the deep valleys, in the sharp knife-like summits of the peaks, there was an indefinable something which seemed to forbid the presence of any human being. It was some monster product of nature, standing alone, and crushing out all that attempted to change it.

A cold wind swept across the platform as the train moved on, and the two women, drawing their furs closer about them, found themselves standing alone, their one communication with the outside world passing slowly from view.

The younger woman turned quickly to the other.

"Well, here we are, Aunt Constance!"

Mrs. Livingstone smiled radiantly in response.

"Yes, Mildred, at last! It seemed to me the trip would never end. I believe I counted every moment that was barring our way here."

An enthusiastic light was in her eyes, a bright

colour in her face — her whole countenance shining with the brilliance that had come in the last few days.

The young woman glanced about and then beckoned to a man standing a little way from the platform.

"We were expecting to be met by some one, but he doesn't seem to be here. Can you direct us to an hotel?"

The man stared at her a moment, then took off his cap.

"Baker's tavern 's the only hotel here."

"Then you will take us there; and kindly help my maid with the bags."

They followed him down the rough road made of stone and gravel, until they came to a row of one-story buildings. A little more than a block away he led them into the most impressive structure of the collection — a two-story wood building ornamented by a large sign.

The proprietor, a rough-looking mountaineer, led them up the steep flight of steps to a room which he unlocked for them to enter. The stuffy odour of a long-closed apartment, mingling with the intense cold, greeted them. The man quickly put a match to the already laid fire, and the crackling sound gave some promise of relieving the dreariness of the place.

"We must have some tea at once. I know you want it, Aunt Constance. It will help warm you. You go with the man, Delphine, and get the tea basket."

When she had finished giving directions for their tea, the younger woman asked the proprietor if any telegram had been received for them, and in reply

the fellow drew a yellow envelope out of his pocket. It was from Barton, saying that he had been delayed, and would arrive late that afternoon.

"Well, I suppose we had better wait until he comes," Mrs. Livingstone said, her voice full of impatience, "but I do wish he had not been delayed. Here is another day almost gone — and nothing definite yet." She sighed, and opening her portmanteau, drew out a writing portfolio. "In the meantime I shall write Winston that we have arrived."

The young woman went to one of the small windows and let up the shade to the top, so that a brilliant stream of sunlight gushed into the room. The warm glow fell directly upon her soft brown hair, bringing out the auburn tints that were not visible in a less brilliant light. It was pushed back becomingly from her high, broad forehead, and arranged under a fur toque. Her skin was soft and warm looking, a deep rich colour just beneath it, and her lips, firm and sweet, a mild contrast against the olive complexion.

Her deep brown eyes gazed steadily out upon the scenes before her for a long time. Their expression was one of life and alertness, an intelligent interest in everything, yet about the woman's whole bearing was a strongly marked hauteur. It showed in the rather high carriage of her head and shoulders, it spoke distinctly in the crisp, clear-cut tones of her well-modulated voice. It was most marked in her entire lack of self-consciousness and complete self-control. Still, with all the signs of wealth and luxury showing so plainly in her handsome costume,

in her rich furs, there was that lack of something which speaks of perfect contentment, — of complete happiness.

The magnificent dreariness of the scene without seemed to hold her spellbound, and her expression gradually changed from one of curiosity and wonder to one of almost fear. After looking at it for a long time, she put her hands up to her eyes as if to shut out the view, then turned away.

"It is awful! It frightens me!"

Mrs. Livingstone looked up, startled.

"What is it, Mildred?"

"This bleak, barren country — it appalls me. There seems to be no hope, no promise, no sympathy in these cold, monster mountains." She drew nearer to Mrs. Livingstone. "I was just wondering, Aunt Constance, as I looked out of that window, what one's idea of life would be if he had grown up in these surroundings. Think of a child at an impressionable age, when his fancies are just beginning to waken, always going about with nothing but this eternal snow and barren country to look upon! How could it make him anything but cruel and merciless? I believe it would have that effect upon me if I had to live here, even now."

She shuddered slightly as she looked through the window again.

"It must mould these people's characters," she continued. "An influence so great, so all-embracing, must carry with it a very lasting impression. Did you notice the man who carried our baggage from the station? When I spoke to him and saw the expression in his eyes it seemed to me that they

reflected all these dreary surroundings. I really imagined I saw the glint of snow in their hardness, and it only convinces me that I am right in believing that we get our most lasting impressions, the things that remain with us all through our lives, from the country in which we are reared. You hardly ever see a person who has lived in a peaceful, beautiful country who has anything but a quiet expression in his eyes. It is that way with people who live in the South. There they look out at you through eyes mellowed and warmed by beautiful sunshine and an easy carelessness; and in those who have known nothing but the rush and restlessness of a large city, you see a reflection of the uncertainty and strife of that life."

She pulled a chair nearer to Mrs. Livingstone and sat down, reaching out and laying her hand on the older woman's knee.

The fire had burst into brilliant flames now and roared cheerily up the chimney. Mrs. Livingstone took Mildred's hand in her own and they sat silent for a few moments, the bright light of the fire throwing a rosy glow upon their faces. For a while the cold without was forgotten.

"And if your theory is true, Mildred," Mrs. Livingstone broke the long silence, "what effect have your surroundings had upon you?" She smiled gently. "Look at me. Let me see what I can read in your eyes."

She put out her hand and turned the young woman's face towards her, steadily looking into her clear brown eyes. Then she smiled again, though a little sadly.

"What do you see, Aunt Constance?"

Mrs. Livingstone looked back to the fire again.

"Not all that I should so love to see, Mildred."

"But tell me what is there," the other insisted. The older woman still kept her eyes averted.

"You see — I know so much, Mildred, that it would only be telling you that. I should not be an impartial judge."

The young woman moved closer to her.

"Yes — but tell me. It is a relief sometimes to have others tell one exactly the truth, — and it is always helpful."

"Then you want me to tell you that when I look at you I see only an unawakened girl?"

"Can you say that of me, Aunt Constance, after all that I have passed through? Do you really think I am unawakened?" She smiled oddly as she put the question.

"I mean every word of it, Mildred. A woman is never really developed until she begins to look out upon the world through eyes of sympathy and unselfishness. To some, perhaps, this never comes. It will not be that way with you, though it has not yet come."

Surprise was showing plainly in her listener's face.

"Sorrow does this for some," Mrs. Livingstone continued; "love for others. It will be the last that will bring it to you. Sorrow has warped you. Disappointment has made you bitter and distrustful. It is the same with fine, high bred animals; if they are hurt early in their youth it makes them fear the world, it kills their trustfulness, and the change only comes long afterwards when they come

into the hands of one who they realise loves them and who will give them only care and kindness. But even then the old characteristics of distrust will come back every now and then. It has been that way with you, Mildred. You were hurt, fearfully hurt, child ; but it will all come out for the best. There is still a great happiness for you."

The young woman shook her head sadly. The bright light in her eyes suddenly dulled as a spasm of pain flashed across her face.

" You said love would cure all that ; but I had love, Aunt Constance. I really loved Hampton when I married him. He represented all that was noble and kind to me. I had never thought of any other man as I did of him. Yet," her voice grew a shade calmer, " it did not make me happy. It all went out in a flash, and I was left in a darkness that I had never dreamed of before. And now," she continued more quietly, a tone of hopelessness in her voice, " now that it is all over, that he is free, I can't seem to place myself. I don't know where to take up my life again ; the foundations seem to have fallen away. There is no solid ground to stand upon. Divorce means nothing to me, except that it has given him a chance to follow his own inclinations. For me, it means that I am forever a prisoner to a great mistake, one that I shall never repeat. Besides, I can not marry again while he is living, for it is one of my deepest convictions that a divorced woman who marries again puts herself on the level of the lowest of women. You see, don't you, how I am placed — how I feel? There can never be anything between us again, and yet my conscience, my belief, keeps

me from moving on to any end. I seem to be utterly adrift."

She pressed her hands tightly together as if to keep back the intense suffering that showed so plainly in her face. Mrs. Livingstone listened intently to every word, her face changing rapidly with the play of sympathy across it.

"Ah, but I was right, Mildred! I said you had not yet known love. You were mistaken in saying you loved him. You did not. Do you think that real love, the most sacred feeling we have, comes and goes in a flash, as you say yours did?" She shook her head. "No. It may come quickly, but it never goes. It grows into your every thought; your everyday life becomes but a background for it. Every little detail is an essential part of it. With you, it was the force of circumstances. Your family approved of this marriage, his family were life-long friends of your parents, everything seemed to point to the match — so both of you fell under its influence. It is so easy to drift into things! Even I felt that it would prove a great success, — and what a great mistake all of us made!"

The young woman slipped out of her chair and knelt beside her aunt, her head bowed in the other's lap.

"If there had been something left me out of it to which I could now turn for support!" she began slowly. "Even the memories are most painful. They have to be kept pushed out of sight to make life bearable. If he had been a man capable of loving me as I needed to be loved! If he had ever pretended to understand me a little, if he had only once

or twice shown some appreciation and respect for my ideals, it would have made things so much easier! I might have had courage enough then to have gone on and made the best of it; but there was not even the slightest bond to draw us closer. I blame myself as much as I do him. I know I am wilful and see only through my own eyes, but I had counted upon him to change all that in me — through love."

She stopped for a few moments, lifting her head and brushing her hair back from her forehead. There was a wistful, dreamy expression in her eyes, as she looked into the fire and continued.

"I often wonder, Aunt Constance, what my life would have been if I had married the right man. Girls have their dreams and they so seldom turn out to be what they really want. Now — it seems to me — I know so much better the sort of man who would have made me happy. I am too self-reliant, too strong in my emotions, to love a man merely my equal. He would have to be my superior, stronger than I am in force and intellect. I am the sort of woman who must be made to do things, not coerced, not persuaded, but actually commanded. Then I should love with all my enthusiasm." She looked up at her aunt and smiled, almost whimsically. "It seems funny, doesn't it, that I should be sitting here telling you all this; but it's really true. I actually do not believe it would make much difference how cruel and merciless the man were, if he made me realise his power and his love. I believe I would follow a man like that to the ends of the world. But — with Hampton — nothing mattered much.

Everything went on with a painful placidity, a complete indifference. That was his attitude towards every one. And I — I was only one of the crowd." She leaned her head closer towards Mrs. Livingstone, tears standing in her eyes. "If I had only had a child it would have made everything so different. Then I should have had something to live for."

She bowed her head and wept softly, while the older woman's hand caressed her hair. The room grew very quiet with only the crackling fire and the occasional muffled sounds in the room below.

A knock sounded on the door.

"There's a gentleman to see you downstairs."

"Tell him to come right up here," Mrs. Livingstone answered, rising.

The maid returned with the tea basket, and as Mrs. Braeme and she arranged the table, placing the cups and starting the kettle to boil, Mrs. Livingstone waited at the open door.

"Ah, here you are at last! We are waiting for you," she said when Barton had entered, his personality at once felt in the small room.

"And carrying New York customs with you, I see," he said, shaking hands with Mrs. Braeme and glancing at the tea things.

"Yes — and calling you all sorts of names for not keeping your promise to meet us. Just imagine how we felt arriving here in this deserted place — two women entirely alone! Aren't you ashamed at failing us? But I insist on Aunt Constance having a cup of tea before we begin talking. It will be ready in a minute."

Barton chose a chair away from the fire. Mrs. Livingstone sat down beside him.

"You got Mr. Livingstone's message?"

"Yes — but what does it all mean? He said that you would explain everything to me."

Mrs. Livingstone clasped her hands in her lap, and leaning forward with the intensity that the subject brought to her, she told Barton in a few words the story as she knew it. "This is the place he lived in up to a year ago," she ended. "His aunt's name was Ellen Thorne. That is all he knows — all we know."

"And his name —"

"Is George Thorne."

"George Thorne!" Barton repeated quickly. "George Thorne! Why — that's rather remarkable! It must be the same! When did you say he was in New York?"

"Just a week ago to-day. But why do you ask?"

"I think — yes — I am sure I know who he is. It is very peculiar." Barton drew his brows together, evidently perplexed. "He left our office in Stone Creek just about three weeks ago. He said he was going back to Denver."

Mrs. Livingstone had risen from her chair at his words.

"You mean you know him — that he worked in your office!"

"Yes — he must be the same. Tall, rather thin, with light hair and eyes —" Suddenly Barton stopped and looked at Mrs. Livingstone. She was searching his face, and as he stopped speaking her

expression changed quickly and she came towards him.

"Did you notice any — anything familiar about him?"

"Yes," he exclaimed. "Why — great heavens! I mentioned it to Allston! His eyes are exactly like yours!"

Mrs. Livingstone sank back in her chair and covered her face with her hand.

"Then it must be true! It is — it is! I know it!"

Mrs. Braeme poured out a cup of tea and brought it to her, sitting down on the arm of her chair.

"Now, Aunt Constance, drink this; and remember your promise to Uncle Winston. You must not accept anything too quickly!"

Barton's eyes shifted from one to the other; finally he got up and crossed the room, then came back to his chair again.

"But this newspaper clipping which you say he had — what was the date?"

"May 3, 18—."

"Ah, I thought so," he exclaimed. Then quickly lowering his voice, he forced himself into an assumed composure which the pallor of his face denied. "You have his New York address? I mean — where he is waiting until he hears from you?"

"Yes." Mrs. Livingstone opened her hand-bag and drew out a memorandum book. "Yes — here is all the information he gave Winston. I copied it in case we could make use of it out here. Do you wish to look at it?"

Barton took the book and glanced over it quickly,

his expression growing calmer as he copied several addresses on the back of an envelope.

"Now," he said easily, "I feel sure we can find out something — with this information — and I can go to him as soon as I reach New York. You see, I wanted to be certain that he is the boy that was in my office. Well," and he met Mrs. Livingstone's anxious look, "and you want to find out what we can here, of his aunt and his parents — or, I should say, the people who brought him up."

"Yes," Mrs. Livingstone answered earnestly, "we want to find out everything we can — I want to see where he lived all this time — where he spent all those years away from me. You see, Mr. Barton — he must be my boy — he must — he must!"

CHAPTER VI

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

WHEN George Thorne passed out of Mr. Livingstone's library he carried with him a mass of impressions that never quite left him the rest of his life. In a way, there was nothing that he had not expected, yet there was so much more. It was to him as if he were just born, with all his faculties and perceptions keyed to the finest appreciation; and not until the outer doors had swung to after him, and he had gone down the steps, did the full realisation of what he had done and the possibilities of his act come to him forcefully.

Then, when the cold, sharp wind struck him in the face, and the sensation of bodily comfort and warmth passed from him, a whole world of doubts rushed over him. What impression had he made? What had the calm, keen, yet kind old man thought of him? What conclusion had he come to? Had there been any consideration whatever of what he had told him? Of one thing he was sure: that he had stood the searching gaze of the man unflinchingly. He felt instinctively that he had acted frankly, at moments even impulsively, and he was sure that would count in his favour. If he had been too calm, too consistently self-possessed, the acting, he reasoned, would have been recognised.

He walked rapidly down the street, gradually

getting back into the crowd and the brilliant lights of the thoroughfare. All the noise and life passed over him unseen, unheeded. Each little detail of the interview kept repeating itself. Finally he turned into a quiet side street and made his way to the humble tenement house where he had decided to take a room. He glanced about the dirty, ill-kept place with a look of disgust. It was all so sordid and ugly. Before he had known this, though only in a half-subjective way. Now, he had the comparison of a handsome home to prove it.

He locked the door behind him and lighted the gas. With the habit grown in the last week, his hand went automatically to his inside pocket and felt for the envelope. An expression of bewilderment flashed across his face; then, when he realised that it had not been lost, he threw back his head and laughed. Then quickly followed another tense expression as the doubt came back to him whether he had done right in letting the paper get out of his possession.

He sat down in an upright chair and folded his arms thoughtfully. The one impression which seemed to recur most often was the one of the man's wife. He had never seen a woman like her before. Those of her class moved in a different sphere from any he had ever known. His imagination had had no clue to help him dream of one like her. He was not quite sure what the impression was himself, only he had felt an indefinable tenderness and sympathy in her presence. It startled him afterwards to know what the sensation meant. It was absolutely new to him. He had known few women, had been thrown

in contact with scarcely any, and with those only in the routine of office work. He had hardly noticed these. Even the old woman, his aunt, who had reared him, had represented no sex to him.

But this beautiful woman with the indefinable attraction which he had never felt before remained insistently before him. The delicate colour of her gown, the exquisite blending of her hair and complexion, the suggestion of perfume in her presence, the sweet expression in her eyes — all of it affected him with an entirely new sensation. She was a being whom not even his dreams had created, and with the new feeling came another flood of doubts. How impossible that she should ever consider for a moment that he was her child. Even to him the idea came with a certain shock of unfitness: the preposterousness of it was so evident; any one would know that he was not her son.

Suddenly he looked down at his hands. Never before had he realised how rough and coarsened they were, though there was a certain power and generosity in the large joints and in the ample, flat palms. Standing up, he went to the small mirror hanging over the washstand. Under the glare of the light his reflection looked back at him full of crudities. Again the knowledge that comparison had brought rushed over him with blinding force.

He shifted his position before the glass, and in another moment the reflection had shown him, though for a second only, a certain resemblance in his eyes to the woman's. Leaning closer to the mirror he looked intently for the resemblance to reappear, but in vain. It had come like a flash and

had gone as quickly. He felt that it must have been the influence of some thought which had brought it.

Hours afterward he began to realise that he was intensely hungry, and went out on the street to find some restaurant that was still open. The long lines of regular house fronts were cold and cheerless in the grey morning light. Everything seemed uncannily quiet and deserted. He walked along in an aimless way, still under the spell of his impressions. Having found an open lunch stand on the river front and satisfied his hunger, he came out again and stood for a long time watching the boats go by like phantoms in the weird morning. The whole world seemed cold and cheerless at that moment, and the grey, sharp light of the dawning day cooled the fire in his brain, bringing with it a dull sense of reality.

The night and its darkness had been a blank background for his thoughts to shine intensely against, but with the coming of the dreary morning all the dreams fled. Doubts took their place, and as the objects about him became more distinct, he came back with almost a shock to the realisation of how wild a scheme he hoped to accomplish.

He shivered slightly as he turned from the river, with its groups of grey masts, and made his way slowly back along the street.

A very old woman, a beggar, was sitting at the foot of some steps, and as he passed she stopped grinding the small organ before her and held out towards him a tin cup. He looked at her carelessly as she raised her eyes beseechingly to him, but went on indifferently, no ray of sympathy in the cold

stare he gave her. He had gone a block further on when he abruptly stopped. The face of the beautiful woman he had seen the night before rose before him suddenly, and in the expression was reproach and pained surprise. He hesitated a moment, wondering why he had thought of her at that time, marveling at the changed expression he so plainly saw in her face. Then, compelled by an unknown force, he turned quickly and went back to the beggar and threw a dollar into her cup. She reached forward and touched his hand, her uplifted face beaming her thanks through its thousand careworn lines. He jerked his hand from her and walked rapidly away, a half-shamed, puzzled look upon his face. In some way he had known that *she* would have done the same, and that *she* expected it of him, and under the power of his thoughts he had given the beggar one of the dollars which were so precious to him.

When he reached his home he threw himself across the bed, with the puzzled look still upon his face. His behaving in that manner was quite beyond his comprehension. He did not yet understand that Mrs. Livingstone had made a lasting impression upon him, the force of which might change his whole life if he could see her again. Then, as if resenting the weakness he had been led into by his fancies, he blotted them all from his mind, and concentrated his energies once more upon the accomplishment of his desire.

In some way the first day passed, then another, until a week had dragged on. They were days empty of all but absorbing thoughts, alternating

hopes and doubts. At any other time he would have been alertly interested in all that was taking place about him; the rushing life of the throbbing city would have thrilled him; each of its points of interest would have held an absorbing place in his attention; but now they passed unnoticed, lost upon him. Under the influence of the waiting he was spellbound, entirely incapable of becoming interested in anything. All of his faculties seemed paralysed. Even his body seemed to become dormant; he was not conscious of the need of food, the intensely cold weather was unfelt, sleep came to him seldom, and when it did, it was filled with weird, incoherent dreams.

Five more days passed; twelve had gone by, and yet no word, not one ray of hope had come to encourage him. The doubts were increasing, the memories of the first interview were becoming indistinct. Still he waited.

At last he could restrain himself no longer, and went one afternoon to the handsome house facing the park and asked for Mr. Livingstone. The same pompous footman told him that Mr. Livingstone was not at home, and quickly closed the door in his face as he stood undecided at the unexpected information.

That night had been the worst of all. Everything had fallen from him in the one idea that he had not succeeded. A wild fury took possession of him for the man who had so tricked him. He knew now the clever ruse which had been used to get the paper away from him, and he had been so convinced that this man had meant to act squarely by him.

Now he realised that a man like that would not wish to claim such a fool as he as his son.

It was all very clear to him in this new light which had taken so long to come; and the woman whose influence he had felt so keenly — she was like all the rest of the cold, heartless, wealthy class. They would have been ashamed to acknowledge a man like him as their child, even if it had been abundantly proven. Their lives were too full of luxury and comfort for them to wish to be disturbed by the introduction of any new element.

He clenched his hands with rage as he recklessly paced the floor; the old, intense, glittering light coming back into his eyes, only harder, more merciless than it had ever been before.

One thing was left for him to do, one thing which would have a crushing effect on these people who had refused to acknowledge him. He could go back to the man in the West, and tell him that he knew his secret — that he had heard the whole plan of their robbery — and demand of them to take him into their confidence, to be made an equal sharer in their booty. And if they should refuse, he could threaten exposure; that would make them accept his terms.

A bright Sunday morning he was sitting before a table, counting out the little money that was left. It was hardly enough to take him back to the place from which he had come. He struck the arm of the chair vehemently when he remembered giving the beggar one of his dollars. How much he needed that now. He had always known that it was foolish to do an act of kindness: the person did not appre-

ciate it — it was only robbing himself of what he should have kept. He smiled bitterly, calling himself a fool as he thought of the influence that had made him do an act of charity. All of the memories of the man and his wife developed into a concentrated hatred. It was one of his most absorbing dreams now to make them feel it, and he wanted them to know, also, that it might have been otherwise if they had treated him differently.

The chiming of church bells had rung out musically upon the bright winter day without his once having heard it. The morning had passed, and the afternoon came on, bringing a warm glow from the lowering sun into the cheerless room. It fell upon his face, bringing out the fierce, determined light in his eyes, and searching out the deep, strong lines of his careworn face.

He was resting his head in his hands, looking steadily before him, when a light knock sounded on the door. "Come in!" he called out sharply, not moving from his position at the table.

The door opened gently, followed by the rustle of a woman's skirt, and Mrs. Livingstone stood on the threshold.

George stared at her a moment in wonder. He was not sure that it was she; he felt that it was only a return of his previous fancy. But this time the image did not waver; it was tangibly there before him; he heard her call him by name. Then he hastily got up from the chair and went towards her.

"You must pardon me. The light was shining in my face. I was not sure at first that it was you."

As he finished speaking he brushed his hand across his eyes as if to steady himself and regain his composure. Her appearance at such a moment had thrown him off his guard; it was too much of a surprise for him to take it calmly.

Mrs. Livingstone walked into the room while George closed the door after her.

"I am Mrs. Livingstone. Possibly you remember having seen me the evening you were at our home. I came in — you know — and fainted."

"Oh — yes. I remember. Won't you sit down?"

He pushed a chair near her and returned to his position at the table, leaning against it slightly, one hand resting upon it.

Mrs. Livingstone looked at him through a short silence, searching his face for some clue to recognition. Her hands clasped and unclasped nervously; there was a whole life of hope and doubt shining from her eyes.

George met her earnest look for a few minutes, then suddenly lowered his eyes. It was not easy to meet this woman's look as it had been with the man's. With the other it had been first mild interest and curiosity; not until towards the last had any kindness or sympathy come. But with the woman it was entirely different. The anxiety, the fear that he was not her son, showed so plainly in her face that the man before her read her thoughts at once. Her next words convinced him that he had guessed right. She had come several steps nearer him in her excitement, until now her hand was upon his arm.

"Did you tell my husband everything? Isn't there something else to prove what you told him?"

Have you nothing but the paper to prove the truth of what you said? There must be something else!"

The words came quickly, her great agitation showing in her voice. Her hand tightened its hold on his arm, and her face, with its yearning eyes, was very near to him.

George turned his face away from hers. For the first time in his life he was afraid to meet another's look. He feared the searching look in this woman's eyes; he feared the great mother love for her lost child which she showed so plainly; he feared the intensity of her feeling which might show her the dishonesty in him; and, more than all else, he feared the woman's influence. Had it not been a memory of her that had made him give away a whole dollar when cents were precious to him? And if she had had that influence when she was not even present, what might she not make him do when she stood there before him? For a moment he felt that she was acting, in some way hypnotising him to make him tell her that it was all a lie.

He moved a little, letting her hand slip gently from his arm, and then walked to the window and stood with his back to her.

"There must be something more that you can tell us. We are so willing to do all in our power."

Her voice came to him as if far off, distant, pleading with him to tell her the truth. He could grasp no other meaning from her words. Beneath all of them he heard but one sentence repeated. "Tell me that it is a lie" kept singing in his brain with irresistible force, and in his great fear that he might

be overpowered, he clutched at the window sill, holding tight to it with both hands.

Again he heard her voice speaking to him out of the distance.

"I have been to Benton. They could tell me nothing there."

Then George turned quickly and looked at her. At the mention of the little town he had seen his hallucination. It was all plain to him now that this woman was doing all in her power to recognise him, but at the same time he saw that they were tracing every clue he had given them. His old instinct at fighting came back to him, and with it a return of courage and steady nerves. But the moment of struggle had left its mark upon his features. It was a strangely pale face he turned towards Mrs. Livingstone. She detected it at once, her eyes speaking her amazement.

"No — my trip accomplished nothing. We had telegraphed to Mr. Barton to meet us at Benton." George started at the mention of the name. "He met me there, and it is very strange — he thinks you are the same one who was in his office at Stone Creek several weeks ago. Are you?"

She leaned forward, and George felt the intensity of her expression. The thought flashed through his mind that Barton must have been able, when he had heard the story, to put the facts together and place him and the manner in which he had gained his knowledge. His blood ran cold with the thought. It would surely mean the end of everything. Mrs. Livingstone's expression brought him back to the necessity of answering her questions.

"Yes — " he said at last, "I worked in his office three months."

Mrs. Livingstone leaned back in her chair and smiled happily.

"I thought so — I am so glad he was not mistaken."

"I don't understand — What do you mean? — What did he tell you?"

"Oh, he told me very little, but from my description of you, and your name, he said he was sure it was you."

George caught his breath with a sigh of relief. So far, Barton had told nothing. Could it be that he did not know? George felt his thoughts sweeping out into endless perspective.

"But did you tell him how I had gone to Mr. Livingstone? — what I had told him?"

"Yes — I told him everything. About the newspaper clipping — indeed — all that I knew."

Ah, then Barton surely knew. It was all too easy to understand for him not to have seen through it at once. The question now was if he had not suspected more. Did not his hearing that part of the story mean that he had heard all of it? And Barton had said very little, she said. To George it was evident now that Barton believed that he knew everything, and feared him accordingly. But how to see him; that was the important point now.

"He came back with you — Mr. Barton, I mean?"

"No — he had to go on to Stone Creek, but I expect him to arrive to-day. He said he would come on immediately after us. Do you know, I wondered

why you had not asked him to help you — why you had not told him your story."

"I thought it my duty to come to you first; besides, you see, I had seen him only once, and it was hardly probable that I should have known that he was in any way connected with Mr. Livingstone. Then I could not call him a friend. I gave up years ago asking people to help me."

When he finished speaking he found himself looking at Mrs. Livingstone closely, drinking in the sympathy that welled up in her eyes for him, and puzzling over the expression that had grown to be so beautiful to him.

She did not reply to his last remark, and they sat for a few moments in the quiet room, both silent. Then she rose as if determined upon some new action.

"I want you to come to my home this evening and talk to my husband. We want you to tell us everything about yourself. You will promise to be perfectly frank with us — won't you?"

Once more the beseeching look was in her eyes. George bowed silently.

"Come at eight o'clock and take dinner with us."

"I shall have to come as I am," he answered, with a glance at his clothes.

She smiled at him and held out her hands.

"Of course — come as you are." Her gloved hands tightened on his. "I want you to trust me and be perfectly honest with me." He felt her great influence sweep over him again as they stood face to face. Then she continued, in her low, sweet voice, "I believe in you — and I am going to do all in my power to help you."

George stood before the closed door a long time after she had gone, a thousand ideas flying through his brain. For a while the necessity of meeting Barton shut out everything else; then the thought of this woman came back more powerful than ever. He turned and looked about the room wonderingly. It was so still that his breathing sounded loud and laboured. The whole place seemed still to be filled with her presence; even the delicate perfume remained to prove that it had not been a dream. He stared about him intently for a while, then, quite suddenly, he dashed towards the bed and threw himself headlong across it.

"Great God!" he cried, his whole body quivering with an intense joy, "I believe I am going to win!"

CHAPTER VII

NEW COMPLICATIONS

"I SENT for you, Mildred, so that you could be here to-night when he came," Mr. Livingstone said to Mrs. Braeme as they entered the library together. "Constance would go to him this afternoon — and she insisted upon going alone, except with her maid, whom she made wait in the carriage while she sought him out in his room. It was only when she came back that I knew she had asked him here to dinner to-night."

Mrs. Braeme sank down amid the pillows of the divan, resting her chin in one hand, and looking up thoughtfully at Mr. Livingstone as he stood before her.

"It was a rather unprofitable trip, Uncle Winston," she said, after a pause of a few moments. "Of course we saw the house where he had lived, we interviewed the man who kept the shop where he had worked — a horribly untidy place, piled up with sacks of meal, and that hideous salt-meat, and barrels of flour, and lots of smelly things. Aunt Constance would stay there an hour interviewing the fellow, and, as far as I could see, getting very little satisfaction out of him. I have never seen her this way before. She seems to be entirely obsessed with the idea that he is her son. You can fancy how anxious I am to see him."

"Well — you will not have to wait long. But you must not forget that he is rather crude. Not that he is coarse or common, exactly," he added hastily. "He shows a marked refinement of mind through all the conditions which are natural from his associations. I am anxious to see how he impresses you."

He sat down beside her and took her hand in his, looking at her affectionately.

"You are very beautiful to-night. I believe the trip did you good."

She answered his smile wistfully.

"Oh — I am always well enough," she sighed. "Sometimes I think it might be interesting to be really ill. It might make me forget for a while."

Mr. Livingstone pressed her hand sympathetically.

"Aren't you better now? — aren't you a little happier?"

She shook her head and looked away.

"No — I never shall be. But don't let us talk about it. Tell me more about this wonderful George Thorne. Do you realise how serious the situation has become with Aunt Constance?"

Mr. Livingstone drew his brows together thoughtfully.

"Yes — I know. That is why I want your assistance. I want you to help me decide what is best to do."

"I can only do that under one condition, Uncle Winston."

"And what is that?"

"That you tell me exactly how you feel, — if your interest in him is keeping you from seeing clearly."

Mr. Livingstone hesitated before answering. When he did, he looked away as if asking himself questions.

"I feel," he said at last, "I don't know exactly what, Mildred. You know I have seen him only once, — yet — he made a peculiar impression upon me. Somehow — I want to help him. Yes — I want to help him — and beyond that I admire him, I feel a real attraction towards him. I can't seem to help it. There is something fine about him," he went on, as if talking to himself, "there is something fine and manly and brave about him."

Mrs. Braeme watched him closely, not missing the tone of yearning that had crept into his voice, a note that struck her as strange and foreign to him. In it she saw a reflection of Mrs. Livingstone's attitude. She leaned back on the cushions more comfortably.

"I wonder what I shall think of him," she said, dwelling on the question.

"Yes, Mildred — I wonder, too. After dinner I want you to tell me immediately, and I want you to be perfectly frank with me, will you?"

"I shall — because I feel that it is my duty. Already you have been influenced by Aunt Constance. Yes — don't deny it. I have seen it — I know it. Ah, here she is."

Mrs. Livingstone came directly towards them, her delicate features flushed slightly, her silvery hair glistening in the subdued lamp-light. Mrs. Braeme rose and made her sit in the most comfortable place on the divan, piling the cushions about her so that she might lean back comfortably.

"I know perfectly well what you two are talking

about," Mrs. Livingstone said, smiling first at one and then at the other. "Of course there is only one thing to talk about these days. What did we use to talk about, Mildred? I have forgotten, haven't you?"

Mrs. Braeme leaned against the arm of the divan, her eyes growing more gentle as she looked down at Mrs. Livingstone.

"Just think, Mildred — I went to see him this afternoon. Such a room! It was so cheerless and bare, it reminded me of that awful Western country. I seem to realise more fully than ever how desolate and lacking in comforts his life has been. There was no fire, everything was so shabby and poorly furnished and ugly! — hideous in fact. Think of our child, Winston, in such surroundings!"

The others listened while she talked on, her eyes dimming slightly, her hands clasped in her lap.

"Poor boy! He seemed so out of place there! I could not help but feel it when I looked into his face. There seemed so much ambition and courage there. All he needs is a little help — a little encouragement. We must help him, Winston; it is our duty, even if there are no proofs. I shall never be happy again — otherwise."

Mr. Livingstone caught the glance in Mildred's eyes, and moved restlessly. Each moment seemed to show him more plainly the depth to which the situation was drifting. A wave of utter helplessness swept over him, and for the first time in his long life he felt adrift.

"What do you want me to do for him, Constance?" he asked after a long silence.

"Ah — that is for you and him to decide," she answered quickly. "After dinner, talk to him about his past life, what he has done, what he wants to do. That is the main thing. Find out what his ambition is and help him to achieve it. That is what I want most to do, Winston, — to help him. A year will prove to us that our trust is not misplaced — and after that — after that —" She broke off and, rising abruptly, walked away from them, her handkerchief to her eyes.

The library door swung open and the footman entered, his words coming with almost a shock upon the stillness of the room.

"Mr. Thorne is in the hall, sir."

Mr. Livingstone rose immediately and went to the side of his wife.

"Show him in, Bankston," he said; and Mrs. Braeme, still with one hand on the divan, her eyes turned eagerly towards the door, did not miss the strident ring in his voice.

George entered the room and stopped suddenly when he saw the three people confronting him, feeling an uncontrollable fear rush over him. For a moment there was a tense silence. His glance moved slowly from Mrs. Livingstone on to Mr. Livingstone, finally resting upon Mrs. Braeme with a start of surprise.

She met his glance, standing perfectly still, and in a flash he got a vivid impression of her beauty, of the perfect lines of her neck and shoulders and figure, the velvety softness of her skin, her slender graceful arms, and the superb string of diamonds tight about her throat. The deep fire gleam in her

rich brown hair, and the lamp-light reflected in the sparkling sequins of her white gown and tinging the green leaves arranged in her hair, seemed to him to increase the wonderful brilliance of her beauty.

Curiously enough, her eyes were the first to fall, and then he realised that Mrs. Livingstone was coming towards him with outstretched hands.

"We are waiting for you," she said, her voice full of sweet welcome. Her smile deepened as she pressed his hand. "And we were talking about you, too."

Then Mr. Livingstone grasped his hand, a warm and friendly grip, and he found himself at last standing before Mrs. Braeme, hearing vaguely the words of the introduction and murmuring something in reply. Yet all the time he was marveling at her beauty and unconsciously comparing her with the older woman whom he had hitherto thought the most beautiful he had ever seen. But this one was like himself; she had the same youth, and fire, and strength — he saw it in the deep glow of her brown eyes, in the high carriage of her head. He thrilled under the realisation that these two were only the first of those who were to follow.

But her acknowledgment of the introduction brought him quickly to himself. It was barely the inclining of her head and the drooping of her eyes, yet in that one glance he felt that she had seen to the limits of his shabbiness and crudity. There was no cordiality, no friendliness in her manner, and not one word of encouragement. Her whole bearing said plainly to him: "You are not of my class. Please do not forget it." Then back to him rushed

the old fighting instinct, and he turned towards Mrs. Livingstone with the cold glitter of such moments in his eyes.

The awkwardness of the first minutes passed quickly. Immediately after the greetings, the butler pulled back the portieres at the far end of the room and disclosed the dining-room beyond. Mr. Livingstone gave his arm to Mrs. Braeme and led the way; Mrs. Livingstone followed with George beside her.

Afterwards, when George looked back over his experiences, that one moment stood out prominently from the others. To stand before these people and return their gaze had been more of a trial than he had expected. It was comparatively easy to meet them separately; then it was more equal, one against him. But when he had come into the room and met them face to face, and so unexpectedly, the great fear had rushed over him that together they might find him out.

He followed them silently across the deep rugs to the table, glistening and brilliant as the domed light gleamed upon crystal and silver. A bowl of pink roses in the center gave a fresh fragrance to the whole room. It was all so wonderfully beautiful to the young fellow that, as he sat down, he felt a great desire that no one would speak to him for a long time, not until after his eyes had roved about the place and drunken in its quiet beauty. The surroundings awakened in him a happiness that seemed apart from anything personal; it was more the very first awakening of a temperament which was fully capable of appreciation, but which, in its ignorance, was not yet even aware of itself.

The dinner passed very much more simply than George had expected. The service of the footmen was so perfect that everything came to him naturally and easily. He had feared that he would be at a loss with these people, feeling that their customs, being entirely unknown to him, would prove embarrassing; but under their kindly and interested inquiries, he felt the growing of an equanimity which gave him renewed confidence in himself. From the moment that one of the footmen had pushed the chair under him he began to feel at ease again, and after several courses had been served he was talking freely and talking well. With the infinite tact of the cultivated woman, Mrs. Livingstone led the conversation into channels in which she knew George could talk well, and at the same time, he realised afterwards, significant of the subject that was uppermost in the minds of all of them. She had begun by telling him of her trip to the West, dwelling on little details and deferring to him to corroborate what she said, finally leaving the greater part of the conversation to him. He found himself telling them of his early life and of scenes about his home, quite frankly and naturally. With the gradual development of the subject, the evident interest of his listeners, and the surety of knowing what he was talking about, there came to him a dignity and facility of expression of which he was entirely unconscious.

As he turned from one to the other of his listeners his face glowed and his eyes sparkled as he recognised their intent interest. Once, he met the concentrated gaze of Mrs. Braeme bent upon him, as if trying to penetrate his conscience and find him out. In

that moment he guessed that she doubted him, and returning her glance with a quick stirring of resentment he saw her eyes waver, then search his again full of fear. He shifted his glance quickly, and their eyes met only casually again during the dinner.

The end of the dinner came with a surprise to George. In a way he regretted it — this ending of his first dinner in such beautiful surroundings — for the whole scene had appealed to him deeply. The magnificence of the room with its raftered ceiling, its heavily carved furniture, the beautiful table service, — all of it was the crystallisation of his dreams. He knew now what it all meant, and in that same moment he determined to let nothing now come between him and accomplishment. It *must* be, he kept repeating to himself; there could be no turning back now — it was too late.

Mrs. Livingstone was the first to rise from the table.

"Suppose we have coffee in the library this evening, Winston. You can talk there with no chance of being disturbed."

"Very well, I shall join you there in a few moments," he answered, rising and standing, while she and George went out of the room. Mrs. Braeme remained in her chair.

Mr. Livingstone selected a cigar from the tray passed him, and, lighting it slowly, settled back in his chair.

"Well, Mildred —" he said at length, looking at her through a cloud of smoke, his face full of pleasurable anticipation.

She frowned slightly when she saw his expression, and for a moment her manner was full of indecisions.

"You said that I must speak to you frankly," she said at last, her eyes lowered to her hands which lay on the table before her. "Well — I am going to — even if I hurt you."

"If you hurt me!"

"Yes — for I know that it will hurt you — more than you will confess, perhaps."

"You mean —"

"The man is an impostor!"

"An impostor!" Mr. Livingstone half rose from his chair, and sank down more quietly. "What makes you say that?"

"I know it. I am sure of it. I can't explain it — but I know I am not mistaken."

Mr. Livingstone's lips twisted into an easy smile.

"What a whimsical answer for you, Mildred!"

She pushed her chair closer to his, and resting her hand against her cheek, leaned towards him, her voice coming fast and low.

"Uncle Winston — listen to me — I'm not whimsical. I know what I feel. This man is imposing himself on you both. I knew it as soon as he entered the room — it showed in his glance — his uncertainty — his — his — what shall I call it? — his assured ingenuousness. And during dinner while I was looking at him he caught my glance and divined my thoughts, I am sure. The look he threw back at me was a confession. He knows I do not believe in him."

Mr. Livingstone's face had not yet responded to

her intentness. Between puffs at his cigar he watched her, half smiling.

"I think I understand, Mildred. He has made a certain impression on you, and womanlike, at first you resent it."

She met his smile now more leniently.

"Uncle Winston, you know very well that I am no schoolgirl that you should talk to me in this way. Though, I confess, he is a type of man that would impress women — impressionable women. He has a certain latent power and an indefinable attraction if it were developed. That is where the danger in him lies. He is attractive."

Mr. Livingstone's face grew suddenly grave.

"Are you speaking seriously, Mildred? You do not believe in him at all?"

"No, I do not, now that I have seen him and know that there is nothing in his story — for you remember we could find out absolutely nothing about his parents. I am sure there is no truth in him."

"The fact that nothing could be found out about his parents appears to me one of the strong points."

Mrs. Braerne moved restlessly and finally rose from her chair and stood beside Mr. Livingstone.

"Uncle Winston, I know I am right. Ask Mr. Barton about him. I believe he feels as I do, for he was pretty careful in not expressing an opinion on the trip. Perhaps he appreciated Aunt Constance's attitude. But you — don't let your hunger for your lost son lead you into this false step. Think of Aunt Constance and the danger to her. You should stop right now —" she halted in her words and clasped her hands tightly — "if it is not too

late already!" Then she went on hurriedly. "But if it will make her happy, do something for him, send him somewhere far off — get him out of her way — and don't let him ever come back. I believe that is the only solution of it — that is all I can see at present."

With her hands on his shoulder they stood silent a few moments, her breath coming a little hard, he holding a cigar which had gone out. With a start they heard Mrs. Livingstone calling to them from the library. Mr. Livingstone rose heavily.

"Mildred, you have almost frightened me."

She put her hand through his arm and walked beside him towards the door.

"Uncle Winston, I am thinking only of you and Aunt Constance. This is a battle I am helping you to fight — a battle against your own sentiment. You see there is no love to blind *me*."

As they reached the door she stopped. "And, Uncle Winston, before I go to-night I should like to speak to this man alone. I think — I don't know — but perhaps I can say something to him that will make him see his mistake."

Mrs. Livingstone and George had gone back into the library, where the walls of books, the soft lights, and the subdued quiet of the surroundings gave a subtle effect of intimacy. Standing by the table, she had talked to him until the coffee was brought, and she had called to her husband and Mrs. Braeme.

"I am going to leave you with my husband now," she said, finally. "I want you to talk to him as you did to me this afternoon." It was the first time

the subject had been referred to during the evening. "We have both decided to help you all we can. Tell him all that you wish to do."

She looked at George for a few moments steadily, the old look of affection coming back into her eyes exactly as he had seen it a few hours before. Then she turned, and with Mrs. Braeme, went out of the room.

George watched them until the door had closed, and then stood silently staring at the place where Mrs. Livingstone had stood. The strange, puzzled feeling had hold of him again, and he felt once more the peculiar influence this woman exerted over him. It was with almost a start that he turned around and found Mr. Livingstone watching him.

George moved towards the chair in a half dazed way.

"She is so beautiful," he said, his hands resting on the arm of the chair. "I have never known any one like her before. Somehow — I think — I think angels must look like her."

"Mrs. Braeme — yes — she is beautiful."

"No — no — I mean Mrs. Livingstone."

There was such a simplicity, such a boyishness, such a perfect sincerity in his voice and manner as George spoke the words, that they did not fail to make an impression where he least expected. The old man smiled, the kind look in his fine black eyes coming back again.

"You smoke, I suppose," he said, waving his hand towards a tray of cigars on the table.

George selected a cigar and settled back in his chair.

"I am more used to a pipe," he said, to break the long silence which had fallen about them.

"You prefer it?"

"I can't say that exactly," George answered, a grim smile at the corners of his mouth. "It was a case of necessity with me. It was cheaper."

Again the silence was about him.

Mr. Livingstone was sitting near the table where the light from the large lamp fell full upon his face and figure. George observed him closely as he sat there, seemingly in an oblivion caused by the cigar smoke. He took in each detail of the man's handsome appearance, his strongly modeled features, his thin grey hair, carefully brushed, the soft black tie worn with his dinner coat, even the shiny pumps with their black bows did not escape the observation of the younger man. Everything about him, his bearing, his clothes, his quiet style, spoke so insistently of a whole line of ancestors who had known nothing but the same luxuries this descendant of theirs was experiencing.

Suddenly a memory of the afternoon came back to George — when he had looked at himself in the mirror and realised how preposterous it was for him ever to hope to pass himself off as the child of these people. This man before him widened the gulf to an impossibility.

Many minutes passed in the unbroken quiet before Mr. Livingstone spoke again. George wondered if it were a habit of his — this quiet smoke — or if he were formulating some plan in which he was to play a part. The man's first words made him feel that this latter surmise was more correct.

"If we decide to help you," he spoke the words very slowly, as if carefully choosing them so as to give no false impression, "what is your idea of what we should do for you? Tell me quite frankly what your hopes are, your desires, your special inclinations. I want to get your view of what is best to do — that will help me."

George remained silent for a short while. Then, getting up from the chair, he walked to the mantel and threw the half-smoked cigar into the fire. He felt that he wanted his hands free at this crucial moment — he would be better able to express himself without any distraction. His back was still towards Mr. Livingstone when he began speaking.

"You must remember I am only twenty-four years old, and practically without any education beyond what I have picked up myself."

He turned around so that he faced Mr. Livingstone as he continued.

"My ambitions, my desires, all my cravings, as I have said to you before, are in too unformed a state for me to put them into words; though this I am sure of, that the little I have seen of you and Mrs. Livingstone has opened a new world to me. It has made me see things differently, and first of all, I believe what I want most now is to take a place among such people as you." He stopped suddenly, attempting to steady the flow of words which rushed to his lips. "To make myself in some way worthy of your trust." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "If such a thing is possible — now." Again his voice shook, and he had to struggle to calm it. "Since I have been here an unlimited horizon

has stretched before me. I did not even know before that all this was in the world." He swept his hand about the room, accentuating the words. "All I want now is for you to give me a chance to make something of myself. Give me the benefit of your help, your advice, your direction. Try me for a year — that ought to prove something."

Mr. Livingstone listened calmly to his words as they sounded out resonantly in the still room. Not once had he looked up.

"What should you wish to do in that year?" he asked, still looking into the fire.

George clasped his hands before him, and then pulled them apart nervously. What a question! How must he answer it! He brushed his hand futilely across his forehead.

"I want to travel—" his words came quickly, in rapid succession — "I want to see the world. I want to become educated. I want to mix with the people who are used to all this. I want to learn to adapt myself to them and their ways. I want to become a — a gentleman."

Mr. Livingstone puffed steadily at his cigar all the time George was speaking. No sign escaped him that he was interested or even listening. When the young fellow had finished he did not reply or look up. The quiet became oppressive to George, and in his impatience he moved across the room and back again. So much was in the balance now that it seemed to him that he must cry aloud or do something violent to let out the excitement that was consuming him. He felt that he was looking out into a vast, empty space, the immensity and uncertainty

of which harassed his soul and exhausted his body. Would the man never speak?

At last his voice came as calm as ever.

"Would you like to make a trip around the world?"

George wheeled towards him, his lips quivering with emotion.

"The reason I ask," Mr. Livingstone continued more rapidly, "is because one of my friends is sending his son on a trip of eighteen months with a companion — a sort of tutor and friend combined. I understand the trip is to be one of work and pleasure. They are leaving the day after to-morrow for San Francisco and on to Japan. What do you think of it?"

"I — think —" the words rushed in a stammer to George's lips — "I think it would be wonderful — I —"

"Then to-morrow morning come to my office," Mr. Livingstone went on hastily, as if for some reason he wished to bring the decision to a conclusion. "I shall introduce you to Mr. Emery and his son. And then I want Mr. Barton to see you — the one in whose office you worked at Stone Creek. Somehow," he rose stiffly from his chair and brushed his hand across his face, "somehow — to-night I am tired. I do not wish to discuss this matter any more — until to-morrow. You will excuse me — if I ask you to go now."

George looked at him quickly and saw in his face a fatigue that left the ravages of his age unveiled. For the first time he realised that the man was old; except for the virility of his manner he might have

been almost feeble. And at this moment he saw that some subtle change had lessened his vitality. George made a step towards him :

"You feel ill?"

"No. I am only tired."

"I am very sorry. Perhaps I have stayed too long. You must pardon me."

"No — I wanted to talk to you. To-morrow we can plan the trip."

Again George's lips trembled, and he looked straight into the old man's eyes.

"You mean — you mean — you are going to send me with your friends?"

"Yes."

George fell back a step. The mist of his feelings rose between him and Mr. Livingstone, dimming his view of the older man and translating him into a vague form, symbolic and pregnant of his future. Thus they stood till George saw him going towards the door. Then he called to him, his voice unnaturally loud.

"Mr. Livingstone!"

The older man turned and looked at him.

"I don't know what to say — I want to tell you what I feel — yet — I don't know how —" Suddenly his voice broke, and a hard, dry sob escaped him.

Mr. Livingstone's hand reached for his.

"Don't bother about that to-night. We have a great deal more to talk about to-morrow. I am going to my room now. Ah, I almost forgot," his brows drew together heavily, "Mrs. Braeme wants to speak to you before you go. Will you wait here until I tell her?"

Left alone, George sank down on the divan and lowered his face in his hands, utterly weary and exhausted. Everything was beginning to be unreal to him, and through the rifts in the immaterial veil he saw himself rising out of a great abyss and mounting higher and higher, all dangers left behind. For surely they were now. Then Barton rose before him, and his body stiffened unconsciously. To-morrow he must see him, he must meet him, he must make a confession of the whole thing, and then drive the bargain. After that surely everything would be finished, the case closed, and his future assured. Ah — after to-morrow! That was to be the beginning of the life that was to wipe out this crime — the end that was to justify the means.

He looked up and started to his feet. Mrs. Braeme was standing a few steps away from him.

"Pray sit down," she said a little hurriedly, and George was quick to see the almost furtive look she cast about the room. "I must speak to you for a few minutes."

She sank on to the divan and motioned him to the seat beside her. He thanked her, and remained standing. Unconsciously he folded his arms and planted his feet a little more firmly, looking squarely into her eyes as she glanced up at him.

"As you know, I went to Benton with Mrs. Livingstone. We have traced every clue that you gave us, and have been able to find out nothing." Her eyes met his steadily as she lowered her voice. "There was nothing to find out. There was no truth in anything you told them."

The whole of her distrust and contempt for a man

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capable of such a deed spoke in her cold tones. It was that, perhaps, more than a certain preparation for her attitude which had come to him during the dinner, that saved George. Beyond a sudden surprise that he let show purposely, he did not answer her with words, feeling that his silence was more expressive of the utter lack of weight what she had said to him held. And in the moments of waiting he felt again the keen joy that her beauty had caused him when he first saw her, then the antagonism that her implied doubt had created during the dinner, and at last he felt himself tingle with a hatred towards her for having crossed his path at this last moment when everything appeared so perfectly adjusted.

"Well?" she said finally, as if waiting for him to answer her charges.

George did not move; his arms folded, his feet well apart, he stood like a rock before her.

"I have nothing to say to your charges. I have told Mr. Livingstone all that I know. I have demanded nothing of him."

The young woman rose impatiently from the divan. She was nearer to George now, close enough for him to see the quick rise and fall of her bosom, to feel the fire in her eyes, and breathe the faint perfume that emanated from her.

"What you say sounds very well," she went on, "but I see through it all very clearly." Her hands tightened about her fan. "You are an impostor!"

Suddenly to George her beauty disappeared. He saw in her only an enemy suddenly risen and barring the way to the dazzling future that was just

there before him. Deep down in his being a barbaric instinct began to stir and poison his veins; he gripped his arms closer together as a wild idea rushed over him to strangle this woman — to get her out of the way before it was too late.

"Of course, so far, you have found it comparatively easy," her voice went on, hateful to him now in all its cultivation. "You are playing on the great sorrow of my uncle and aunt, and you hope to gain your point by the uncertainty of the whole thing."

She stopped, shifted her eyes from his as if for a moment's relief from the intensity of his, and then went on in a slightly gentler tone. "Do you realise what you are doing? You are awakening all the past sorrow in my aunt's life. You are stirring the old love for her child which has slept for years. You are trying to force yourself into that position when you have not the slightest right to it. And the result — when she finds out — for that is sure to come — will be that her heart will be broken. It will kill her!" Her voice now was frankly full of pleading. "Stop before it is too late — won't you? If there is a spark of manhood in you, go away now — and don't ever come back."

With a revulsion of feeling she came a step nearer George, her eyes flashing into his.

"You shall go! You shall not ruin her life!"

For a second they stood face to face, their eyes on a level. Then the girl gave a low startled cry and turned away. In George's eyes, as she looked so closely into them, she had seen the glint of snow-covered mountains, the cold, cheerless, barren

country of his birth. It was heartless, pitiless, without one trace of mercy.

When she had reached the door, Mildred Braeme stopped, and her voice came husky with excitement. This time her eyes did not meet George's.

"Go on then — with your dastardly scheme. You know, though, what it will make of you — a murderer. For when she finds you out it will surely kill her!"

CHAPTER VIII

BEGINNING THE NEW LIFE

As George struck out into a brisk walk, making for his lodgings, the noise of the city, the brilliant light and the jostling of crowds coming out of theaters gave him a renewed sensation of joy. It was all so gay and wonderful and throbbing with life, — and he, now, was a part of it. Passing on to streets more quiet and dark he became calmer and more thoughtful, the swift motion of his body and the bracing wind accentuating the clearness of his impressions of the evening. The characters that held his fate in their hands ranged themselves before him like some mystic drama created whole out of his imaginations; and viewing them in this light, he weighed with deep insight his chances with each of them, their trust and their doubt, and in the summing up he found himself breathing easier. One thing, the desire he had created in Mrs. Livingstone controlled the situation, influencing her husband, even influencing the woman who had crossed his path at this eleventh hour. A smile of triumph twisted his lips when he thought of her. Through the mere concentration of his will he had forced her back upon herself, even making her, in her last words thrown at him, almost confess that her opposition was useless. But, beyond the satisfaction of knowing that he had crushed the danger out of her, her

words stuck in his mind with an insistence that he loathed. Why had she chosen them? What relation should they have to his case? Murderer? Was it not quite the other way? Was he not making the woman happier?— he had seen that himself.

Like an undercurrent, colouring these thoughts and sounding insistent beneath them, was the one danger that had yet to be surmounted — the necessity of meeting Barton. It was imperative, too, that they should meet alone and thrash out some sort of understanding before they met in Mr. Livingstone's presence. That Barton must have suspected George never once doubted, and that his suspicions would bring him at once in search of him seemed a reasonable deduction. The two stories, the scheme of robbery and the story of the child, were so blended in the conversation that had taken place, that Barton must surely have realised at once that if he had heard one he had heard the other. In a sudden spasm of fear George saw, for the first time, that he had let the obsession of the one case take off the keen interest of the other, and for a while he felt that he knew too little to frighten Barton; then, the fact that he knew something strengthened him and made him see that, with clever manipulation, he could easily give the impression that he knew everything; at least, in that lay his one chance to win. And if he did win, he forced himself to believe that it would be through the same cleverness that had blinded the others.

Going up the dark staircase of the lodging house he saw his door open and a light burning within. Hastening forward in surprise, he crossed the

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threshold and was confronted by Barton, sitting in the center of the room.

"Well, it's time you were here," Barton exclaimed, without other greeting. "I've been waiting here for you since seven o'clock. Where have you been all this time?"

George met his searching glance with forced composure. That the necessity of playing this part of the game should come upon him without preparation gave him a sensation of foundations slipping away from under him; though, through Barton's steadiness of voice, with its inflection of command, his thoroughly sensitized intuition felt an uncertainty that gave him a rush of assurance.

They looked at each other in silence, the older man's face a little pale, the force of his personality gathered towards one object — the intimidation of the young fellow before him.

"I have been to Mr. Livingstone's to dinner." George found himself growing steadier and steadier as he saw more clearly through Barton's artificial calm. "Won't you sit down? You seem a little excited."

George pushed forward a chair and smiled at his companion.

"Sit down! — in this cold barn! — I guess not! I've been here five hours already — that's quite long enough. Besides — I've got a good deal to say to you." He walked up to George and took hold of his arm. "We'll go to some restaurant where we can be comfortable."

Without another word spoken between them, they went down the steps and two blocks away to an

obscure restaurant, where Barton chose a table and motioned George to the seat beside him. Giving an order for a bottle of champagne, Barton settled back in his chair and faced George with a broad smile.

"Well," George said, meeting his look squarely and seriously, "you say you have a great deal to say to me?"

"Yes — a great deal," Barton answered, and then stopped.

"Very well — why don't you say it? — I am ready to hear you."

Barton straightened in his chair and pulled out a handkerchief, lightly mopping his forehead. After a moment he leaned forward, his voice lowered insinuatingly.

"I know who you are."

George smiled easily.

"Naturally — I remember you said I made an impression on you, and you spoke of my eyes being remarkable — or something of the sort."

This time Barton smiled.

"That is what I wanted to know. Then you did listen at the door?"

George waited a minute, wondering if Barton had not been sure and was sounding him. The possibility of his having carried through the scheme without Barton being conversant with it rushed over him with sudden force, then died away in the certainty that it was better that this danger should be settled once for all. It had to come sometime in his career — he had always known that; and there was a certain satisfaction in disposing of it at the very beginning, for then the road would be clear.

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"Yes — if you must know it," he answered at length, "I did listen at the door."

Barton drew his chair up closer and leaned on the table. George found himself remembering his first impression of the man, now only a few weeks off, yet seeming to him years so much wider had his horizon grown. He remembered the effect on him of the cultivated sound of his voice, of his handsome clothes, of his air of ease and careless indifference; all of that was still there, yet George knew instinctively that it was the effect of association, an outward influence, a shell that successfully covered the inner rotten core of the man. He thrilled with a flash of intuition that told him it was a stride in his own development to appreciate this difference.

"You began listening as soon as you went into the room?" Barton asked, his voice still lower.

"No, some words of Allston's caught my attention first. It was then that I began listening."

"What were those words?"

"It is rather difficult to remember — exactly." George chose his words with deliberate indifference, and noted, with an onrush of confidence, that it was having the desired effect of breaking Barton's insufferable nonchalance. "I think, though, that it was something about penitentiary offense."

Barton's lips contracted.

"Then you heard what was said. I thought so — in fact, I felt pretty sure of it the first time I heard the story from Mrs. Livingstone. Otherwise you would not have dared — or perhaps never even thought of it. It is a fortunate thing for you I held my tongue."

This time George smiled broadly.

"And still more fortunate for you, Mr. Barton."

"What do you mean, you —" he stopped abruptly.

George looked about the room. No one was within hearing distance.

"I mean just what I said. It was very fortunate for you that you did not tell what you knew about me. It would have meant exposure of your own scheme."

Barton forced his composure, and, reaching for the bottle of champagne, started to fill the glass placed before George. With a quick movement George pushed the glass from him and shook his head. He wanted Barton to drink as much as he would, but his own mind must be kept perfectly clear.

Barton drank a glassful, then smiled leniently.

"Have you got the effrontery to sit there and think you are threatening me — you young fool?" His tone was entirely amiable.

"I have no desire to threaten you in the least, Mr. Barton. It was my intention to look you up to-morrow anyhow and thrash this matter out between us. We might as well get it over with at once."

"Well — probably you have thought it over more than I have. What do you propose? How are you going to buy me off from telling? Do you think your influence is already great enough to get a sum large enough to be interesting to me?"

"No — I have not thought of that. Candidly, Mr. Barton," and here George's keen pleasure at the trend of the interview almost got the better of him,

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"I had only thought of what you could offer me — to be silent."

"That sounds very pretty. You forget that you have nothing that can convict me. I have everything to prove my case against you."

George lowered his eyes for a moment, then flashed them fully into Barton's face.

"No, Mr. Barton, I can't prove a thing on you. I don't want to, only —" here he hesitated barely a moment—"I supposed you did not want your little scheme for getting hold of Stone Creek exposed. Do you?"

"That's just it. There is nothing that you can tell that can be shown. There's nothing on paper. So far, it's only an idea."

"Yes — I know — but you want to carry out that idea, don't you? I think you said you thought you could use me for some time."

"What has that got to do with the question?"

"Everything. What I should tell would make it impossible."

Barton pulled out his cigar case, chose one carefully, and lighted it.

"You think Mr. Livingstone would believe anything you told him after what I shall tell him?"

"Perhaps he might not believe me," George added, his voice still firm and assured. "I hardly think he would forget it. As soon as your plan developed he would begin to see that I had told him the truth."

"Do you know," Barton's face changed subtly, "I knew you were damned clever the moment I saw you."

George held up his hand deprecatingly.

"No compliments, please, Mr. Barton. I think we understand each other now. You have your —" he paused in the selection of a word, "your incriminating information on me; I have mine on you. Neither of us is afraid of the other, let us say, yet — we are both going to keep silent. I shall not interfere with you — I expect the same of you. I hardly see why it is necessary for us to meet again."

George's assurance and self-confidence had at last beaten down the bulwarks of Barton's hauteur. His manner had shifted now to one of frank friendliness. He motioned to a waiter, then turned to George.

"Another bottle. You must take a drink with me."

"Thank you, nothing."

"But we should celebrate — er — our little contract."

Throughout the interview George had felt a growing disgust of the man before him, which increased with the certainty of his own success. Before, what he thought was cleverness had held his admiration, but now, sitting before him in the full exposure of a scheme which, through its comparative simplicity had grown almost petty, George felt an uncontrollable desire take hold of him to tell Barton what he thought of him and wash his hands of him so thoroughly that the future would never bring them together. He felt that, in some way, the voicing of this desire would help in cleansing himself of the sense of filth which his talk with Barton had given him.

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"I see no reason to celebrate — I see no reason to call it a contract," he began, heedless of the effect of his words. "Furthermore, I don't think you quite understand me. No matter how confidently you may believe it, I am not exactly your type, Mr. Barton. Up to the time I heard you tell Allston that story I had been absolutely honest. Oh, sneer if you please, but it is true. It's my record. I can prove it. This thing that I have gone into has been accomplished through dishonourable methods — I grant you that. I am not trying to avoid that implication. But — it is not going to lead me on to similar cases — it is going to be quite otherwise — it is going to lead me up and up." His face brightened with the passion of his words, and he leaned across the table, his eyes burning into Barton's. "And just for that reason I want this to be the last conversation between us. It's dirty, it's of the gutter, it's rotten. I want to get away from it. I am going to spend my whole life in trying to forget it, and the first effort in that direction will be to avoid you in every possible way. I don't want your assistance. I don't want a proffer of friendship from you — I don't want even to see you again, if such a thing is possible. Do you understand?"

Barton's lips were curved into a frank sneer. When George ended he gave an abrupt, incredible laugh.

"Suppose I too should develop this noble tendency you speak of so very, very eloquently — in what position would that then place your charming theories?"

George shook his head slowly.

"No, Barton, you won't change. You have always had what I wanted — and it hasn't helped you. The end I have in view justifies, in a way, what I have done. It is going to save me from being what you are. We are at the crossroads, and we are going in directly opposite directions. Perhaps, some day, you will understand what I mean; though, frankly, I doubt it."

Barton's face deepened in colour as George's words hit him hard and fast. Finally he pushed back his chair and stood up.

"I see plainly now that you are a bigger fool than I thought," he said, his voice shaking a little in violent anger. "You are a young fool, drunk with playing with fire. Do you think I believe a word you've said? Do you think if I did I would let you go on with it?"

George rose also and faced him, his expression aggravatingly calm.

"I didn't expect you to believe me. I don't know why I said it to you at all."

He made a movement to go towards the door. Barton stood firm.

"And if we separate now," he answered, the sneer deepening in his tones, "what has your remarkable imagination created as an interview that will take place when we meet to-morrow morning in Mr. Livingstone's office?"

"You mean — when you enter? You want your cue?"

Barton's rage was getting the better of him. George saw the muscles in his jaw throbbing as he ground his teeth.

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"Yes — my cue — if you call it that."

"Well — it's to come in and see me and recognise me and speak of my having been in your office. That will be sufficient, I think."

"And after that?"

"That will be the end of our association. The rest I can handle alone."

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"Then you think I am disposed of?"

"Yes — I'm sure of it."

"All right, then. But remember, I said I could use you, and I still believe I can."

"I don't fear you in the least, Mr. Barton. Shall we go now — if you are quite ready?"

The next morning Mr. Livingstone was waiting for George, so that he was shown immediately into his private office where he found two men already seated. As the introductions were made, he got an impression of a quiet, middle-aged man who looked at him kindly through heavily rimmed spectacles, and then, of a young fellow about his own age, whose glance met his full of frank, rather ingenuous curiosity.

"Dr. Lane," Mr. Livingstone continued, when George had taken a seat, "is going to make the trip with Walter Emery."

"Yes," Emery put in laughingly, "he is going to be a sort of tutor-chaperon for eighteen months. I tell him it is only a sort of chivalric bravery that makes him risk it."

"Nevertheless — he says he is willing to under-

take another charge," Mr. Livingstone went on, with a glance at George. "I have just asked him if you might join them, and he has consented."

George's eyes flashed with joy. The three men saw it and smiled.

"Now, if we go out to lunch we can talk it over in detail; and Walter," Mr. Livingstone turned to the young fellow who had already begun to ply George with questions, "do you think you are reliable enough to help — Mr. Thorne," he hesitated barely over the name, "select the things necessary for such a trip?"

"I'll do my best," Emery answered. "Something of a job, though, for one day."

"Yes — but you can do it, I am sure. I want him to have the best of everything, and from what your father tells me you know how to select the best."

"My governor been kicking again about expenses? — What? It's growing into a habit with him lately."

Mr. Livingstone pressed a bell and ordered his coat and hat. While waiting, Barton stopped at the door of the private office and looked in.

"Come in, Barton!" Mr. Livingstone called to him. "Here's the young man I spoke to you about."

George took Barton's outstretched hand and smiled easily.

"I worked for Mr. Barton three months, under Mr. Allston," he said, with all the assurance of success. "But I only saw him once." Then to Barton, "Probably you don't remember me."

"Yes — I remember you distinctly," came Bar-

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ton's calm reply. "It was only for a few weeks. I told Mr. Allston to try to make you satisfied there — that I thought you were promising. It seems that I was not mistaken."

For several seconds they looked into each other's eyes, then Mr. Livingstone interrupted.

"Will you join us at luncheon, Barton? No? Well, then, about two or three. Don't forget we are going to discuss that railroad at Stone Creek."

As George followed him out of the room, he turned and looked once more at Barton. This time George smiled, and Barton scowled.

The luncheon passed rapidly, full of plans of the trip, and vitally interesting to George as he watched and listened to the men he was to be associated with for so long a time. Again he felt deeply the power that such a man as Mr. Livingstone must possess, to be able to take a man like him, practically out of the street, and give him these two associates, who, in the vast difference of qualities, would give to him, through the combination, just what he needed most — the influence of a student of many years and the companionship of a young man of his own age who had all the *savoir faire* of a college graduate.

After luncheon, Emery crossed to George and slipped his arm into his.

"Will you go with me now? I have my car at the door waiting, and this afternoon I just have to make a few visits before getting off."

After a few more words with Mr. Livingstone and Dr. Lane, in which Mr. Livingstone told him that he was expected to dine with them again that even-

ing, George followed Emery to the street, where a motor car was waiting at the curb. Once seated, he saw Emery looking at him again, with the same expression of surprise and half-veiled curiosity. This time George knew that he was taking in the details of his shabby appearance and his threadbare clothes.

"Of course you won't be able to get anything made — you haven't time for that; but I think we might pick up some fairly decent things ready made. I have heard of a shop where they say the styles are really passable. Of course, you know, one can't really get the style of one's garments here that one can in London."

"You prefer English clothes?"

"Of course — Yes. We get the best of everything from the English."

"I suppose you're right," George answered quietly. "We got the United States from them, didn't we?"

Emery flashed a look at him and laughed outright.

"You know — that's rather good;" then, more cordially, "but tell me, what, exactly, do you need for the trip?"

"I have only the suit I have on."

"Really?" the other looked amazed. "Then you do need a lot."

"I certainly do," George answered. "I have nothing."

"Lord! I wish I could get along with one suit."

"You could if you had to."

At the clothing establishment, Emery preceded George, overlooking superciliously the suits dis-

played. Finally he turned to George, who stood a little to one side, amused and interested. It was all so new to him that he was perfectly contented to let Emery pilot the expedition; besides, it was the beginning of his lessons in observation.

"I think this will do pretty well for a traveling suit," Emery continued, with just enough indifference in his manner to let the loquacious salesman know that his suggestions were of no value whatever. "And this blue serge is fairly decent — one must always have a blue serge. Nothing else takes its place. And now for a morning coat — yes — that really fits you better than one could hope. You don't mind my saying you've got stunning shoulders. I suppose you went in for athletics at college."

George smiled grimly.

"Not guilty."

"Oh — then prep school."

"No, you forget, I've worked ever since I was old enough to stand on my feet."

"Fancy — really — what bully fun to get started with what you are going to do that early. Now — your dinner clothes. Yes — and your evening things. You ought to have particularly good evening clothes for I've got letters to the Embassy in Tokio. We'll probably see some diplomatic life there, and in London too. No — that coat's frightful, take it away. Try this one. That's the trouble with American tailors — they make a fellow look like a stuffed dummy or the Colossus of Rhodes. Yes — that's better. I wonder if we'll ever learn over here to look thoroughly comfortable and at

the same time well groomed. It seems to be the hardest thing in the world for Americans, when they go in for being well dressed, to keep from looking like they were dressed for church; after all, fashionable negligé is an awfully hard thing to get exactly right. Now — for the boot maker. It's a pity you haven't time to have your boots made."

"You have spent much time in England?" George asked, when they were in the car again.

"Oh yes, I run over there every summer. It's great too. Don't think I'm un-American, talking as I do, but we do learn such a lot from them. Frankly, I'm always taking up some of their customs."

"Then, I suppose I must begin wearing my handkerchief up my sleeve," George smiled, looking at the glimpse of linen showing inside of Emery's cuff.

Emery laughed good-naturedly.

"Say — but you're observing. I believe we're going to get along famously. But here's the boot-maker. . . . Now, for your linen, and ties and gloves. Gad, this is something of a job, isn't it! Eh, what? . . . By the way, those pajamas are attractive! How do you like 'em? I can't stand silk against my skin."

"I think I should like to try it," George replied, his eyes narrowing with a twinkle. "You see — I'm going in for new sensations."

"Well — you'd better get a dozen suits at least. You'll need them before we get back."

"Hadn't we better ask how much they are?" George inquired, off his guard for a moment.

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"Lord! you make me think of my governor," said Walter quickly. "He always wants to know the price of everything. Fifteen dollars a suit — eh? Pretty steep, but I guess we'll go it. We're after comfort, you know."

George started involuntarily. One hundred and eighty dollars for something to sleep in!

"Now — let's see. Oh, yes — I suppose you do need some traveling bags and trunks. You say you've never been to college — you've never been to Europe — you've never even been to New York before? Say, old man, just as a tip, you know, except for your clothes and not being quite — er — *soigné* — "

"I don't speak French. What is *soigné*?"

"Eh, what? Get that! *Soigné*, I said. Pretty good. But let me see. I think well groomed hits it pretty close. As I was saying, except for that — you don't show up as such — a — "

George met his eyes seriously.

"Yes?"

"Well — " Emery hesitated, "as a fellow so frankly out of the wilderness, as you say you are. Of course — your accent is frightfully Western, old man, but you can sandpaper that off, if you try hard enough."

George laughed outright.

"You know — I like your frankness. Don't hesitate to say what you please. Criticise me all you want — that's what I need. Of course, we're not going to agree on everything, but I'm willing to hear, anxious to, in fact, all you have to say and suggest. You see — you have always had every-

thing that I have always wanted, and I'm only too glad to have the chance of your advice."

The words were subtly flattering; George had meant them to be so, and Emery flushed with pleasure, grasping George's hand cordially.

"Say, old man, you're the right sort. We're going to have a bully time together. It's going to be ripping — showing you how!"

"It's going to be ripping to be shown how!"

That night, when he had come out of the library and stood in the hall putting on his coat, George took a lingering glance at the surroundings. The farewells had been said, the last words spoken, and now he was going away from them for a year and a half; perhaps, in the kaleidoscopic changing of events, he might never see them again. A wave of yearning swept over him as he stood there, a craving that, for a few moments, left the wonderful future before him empty. He was keenly conscious of the sensation, feeling it come with sickening force, and leaving him weak; still, he was not certain yet that he understood exactly what it was.

In the moment of delay he heard the rustle of a woman's gown, and saw Mrs. Livingstone coming towards him.

"There is just one thing more I want to say to you," she said, standing before him, her hands resting lightly on his shoulders, her eyes yearning into his with all her awakened mother-love. "Whether you are my son or not — I want you always to think of me as your mother. Somehow — I feel that this thought will bring you safely back to me." She



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drew his face down to hers and kissed him on the brow.

George suddenly understood everything. It was this woman's influence, her love, her great need of him, that touched him in the one vulnerable spot. In that moment he saw clearly that not only had his success come through her but that the great danger of his future lay in her hands.

CHAPTER IX

A STORY AND A TOAST

GEORGE stood at the bow of the boat looking steadily before him. Everywhere surrounding him were great piles of snow and ice; the rigging was a network of long icicles that scintillated and trembled in the rhythmic rise and fall of the great vessel. The day was a depressing grey; low clouds stretched across the limitless expanse of leaden sea, in places touching and mingling with the restless waves, until both were lost in an opaque mist. The decks were deserted. The wild, tearing wind had driven every one in, and those whose duty kept them facing the weather rushed about trying to keep their blood tingling in the biting cold.

George did not once realise that he was alone. The wind swept by him unnoticed and unfelt. The icicles, crashing every little while as they fell, did not rouse him from his reverie. His head was thrown far back, the high collar of his ulster turned up about his neck, and his arms folded across his breast. The flurries of the wind, blowing his hair back from his face, were exhilarating to him; the salt taste in the air was delicious; and the sharp, intense cold seemed to clear his brain and sharpen his perceptions. The steady movement of the boat formed an accompaniment for the song of his thoughts as it rushed through his brain, — and into the beyond he always looked.

For a while, the last few weeks of intense uncertainty sank into oblivion. Everything had come about so simply. It must have been decided that night when he had taken dinner with them, he kept repeating to himself, for after that they treated the matter as if it only needed a few details to be completed. They had consented to his wish and were sending him abroad for the opportunity to prove their trust in him. This confidence already showed in the letters of introduction they had given him, the letter of credit speaking it even more than the others in its generous limitations. He pressed his hand against the pocket which held the leather case and smiled. They should not find that they had misplaced their confidence. They should be proud of him yet. It was a duty to himself not to disappoint them.

He congratulated himself that he had won out against great odds. Even in the end, just as it seemed that nothing else could come to alter the decision, a strong influence had begun to work against him. The woman — he saw her now distinctly before him, in a grey mist into which the boat was plying its way. He felt again, as if she were present, the cold contempt of her beautiful eyes; he saw distinctly the glitter of her diamond collar as it sparkled against her ivory throat; and once more he hated her with all the fury of aroused fear.

The feeling had grown upon him in the days that followed the meeting with her, that it should be one of his objects to crush her in some way, that her insult had sunk so deep that it could not be forgotten.

Some way would come to him — he would make it come — in which he could find a way to hurt her cruelly; and he would do it pitilessly until she begged for mercy. Then would come his time to laugh.

When this thought had worn itself out in its intensity, he would go back over the last few days which had been so full of the keen joy of anticipation, of the preparations for his trip, and the comforting certainty of knowing that he was to be held back in no way by the lack of money. Then the rush across the continent to catch a boat that was sailing from San Francisco, the almost unreal whirl of scenery through the car window, the boat where everything was arranged comfortably for the long voyage, and, at last, the wide, endless sea that seemed to cut him off from the past — all this blended into an effect which made him feel that he had begun his life over again, started on an existence that was to be free from the dismal struggle of his earlier days, and which, in its associations and influences, was to cleanse him of the dishonour through which he had succeeded. A determination to forget Barton and Allston and their criminal scheme eased his conscience and made him feel that, in wiping it from his memory, he would escape all self-accusation.

He stood at the bow of the boat for an hour, perhaps two or three — he did not count them, nor was he aware of the rolling of the boat which was gradually growing heavier and more precipitate. Huge banks of grey clouds had slowly gathered and borne down upon the labouring vessel until everything seemed to be melting into the thick mist, the deck becoming invisible a few yards away.

Suddenly a tremendous wave swept over the railing and went writhing down the ice-laden deck ; then only was it that George came back to the realisation of his surroundings, and again he smiled, as he groped his way down the deck, holding tightly to the rail.

Finally he reached the smoking-room, and opening the door, fell headlong as it slammed violently against him. A shout of laughter met him as he quickly pulled himself together and stood up. One of the men from a group about a table went towards him and helped him to rise, asking him if he were hurt. The next moment another plunge of the vessel threw them against each other before George had time to answer ; then he too joined in the laugh with the others.

" You'd better sit down — you two," one of the men called from the table, as he gathered up the cards. " You can't stand up against a sea like this. Come on back, Braeme, you're delaying the game."

George started and caught hold of a chair to steady himself, then looked quickly about the group to find the man who would answer to that name.

" I'm coming as quick as I can. Catch me if I fall on the way there," the man beside George said, making a rush for the table in a moment when the rocking of the boat diminished.

George sat down on a bench against the wall, a little way from the table where the four men were sitting. An electric sidelight fell full upon their faces, and he watched them undisturbed for a long time. More often than he had counted, a waiter brought them trays of glasses and bottles, and every

minute it seemed to be another's turn to order. While the supply kept up incessantly, their voices grew louder and less constrained.

The one face to which George's attention was turned most often was that of the man who had attempted to assist him. He was handsome, rather too stout, yet his features were generous and pleasing. His fine, dark hair, large, expressive eyes, and vivid, clear colouring made his general appearance essentially attractive. His mouth was the worst feature, giving the whole face a careless, shiftless, undetermined expression which forced itself upon the observer as the one incongruity in a handsome ensemble. The man would have excited admiration principally through the strength of his animal magnetism, and would have also caused regret after a calm, dispassionate survey, in which one realised there was more lacking in the face than at first appeared possible.

George in the beginning saw only the man's handsome appearance; after a longer inspection he intuitively recognised a weakness, a nature easily persuaded; and as he intently studied the face, he wondered what relation, if any, he could be to the woman who had so quickly found him out. He regretted now that he had not asked more about her; had not made some inquiries as to who her husband was. All that he knew was her name, and that Mrs. Livingstone had spoken of her as "Mildred."

Glancing about the room he saw Walter Emery sprawling on a seat and reading, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. George crossed the room and sat down beside him.

"I thought you were overboard," Walter yawned, putting down his book. "Where have you been?"

"Out on deck — enjoying the storm."

"Well — it's a bully one. I think we'll have enough of it by morning."

"Where is Dr. Lane?"

"Turned in long ago. His sea legs are rather wobbly."

George looked back at the men at the card table.

"Do you know any of those men?" he asked indifferently. "One of them is called Braeme. At least, I heard one of the men call him by that name."

Walter's glance rested on the crowd a moment, then he turned back to George.

"Yes — he's Hampton Braeme — married Mrs. Livingstone's niece. I know him — at least I used to — and I was rather glad to see he did not recognise me."

"Why?"

Walter met George's eyes for a second.

"Because," he began slowly, "I've always been very fond of Mildred, and he's such a goat — made her life a regular hell until she had to leave him. They're divorced now. By the way, did you ever hear the Livingstones speak of her?"

"Yes, I met her at their home."

Walter put his feet to the floor with awakened interest.

"By Jove, you did! Well — isn't she corking? I've always thought she was the best looking woman in New York — except Edith."

"Of course I can't compare them," George smiled easily, "as I never saw the latter."

"You will though, when we get back. Edith is the goddess," Walter went on airily, "I have hopes of marrying. She is a wonder, right straight through, and is exactly the pal for me. Now, Mildred, as you know, is a trifle over my head — I mean she sees through you too quick and laughs at you. I don't like that kind of a woman to live with, do you? I'd rather they'd be blind and adoring—like French women; at least like they pretend to be."

"Then why did Mrs. Braeme marry this sort of man?"

"Heaven knows! Who ever could explain any marriage, anyhow? All of them are incomprehensible to me — except my forthcoming one," and Walter laughed happily. "Braeme, though, is a handsome chap, isn't he?" he went on more quietly. "At least he used to be. He's too bloated now. And Mildred, like all other young girls, slipped up in her judgment when it became a personal matter. I'll wager she can place a man quick enough now, though. What are they calling to us about?"

George looked across the room and found Braeme motioning to him.

"Come over here and take a drink with us," he called to George. "You need it after your tumble."

"Will you go?" George turned to Walter.

"No. I'm struggling through this wretched book on Buddhism. I've only got three weeks to finish it in, and that's not half enough. You go though. I'd like to know the way you size him up."

George moved across the room and sat down beside the table. Braeme, in the meantime, had

turned to the waiter and given him an order; and George, now sitting beside him, was startled to see a much older man than he had at first thought. There were dark circles beneath his eyes, and two deep furrows on each side of his mouth, though they were more the lines of dissipation and of wasted energies than of years. The bloodshot eyes and nervous, shifting hands completed this impression.

The game continued for a few moments longer until the waiter reappeared, then Braeme threw down his cards and stood up from the table. ♦

"I'm not going to play any more. I'm going to take a run out on deck. It's too beastly close in this room."

"If you take a run on that deck to-night it will be your last," one of the crowd laughed.

"I'll do it, though, damn you — I'll do it if it kills me," Braeme cried, rising and throwing his cards vehemently on the table.

"That's all right, Braeme. Sit down. Here come the drinks," and a conciliatory hand pulled him into his chair.

The tray was pushed on to the table and the glasses passed around; then the waiter filled them.

"Hallo! It's champagne this time! To whom are we supposed to drink now, Mr. Braeme?"

Braeme did not reply. He kept his eyes fixed on the glass before him as if calculating whether his shaking hand were able to carry it to his lips. It was evident that under the influence of the liquor he was fast losing control of himself.

"I drink to no one," he said, his voice quivering uncertainly. "Do you hear? To no one."

One of the men held his glass up with an insinuating smile.

"Oh yes, Braeme; let's drink to her."

Braeme's hands suddenly clenched, and he turned fiercely to the man who had just spoken.

"To her? To whom do you mean?" he demanded.

The other sat back less amused.

"Well — there must be some one whom you called 'her'," he began, as if to palliate the anger he had roused. "Isn't there?"

Another fellow leaned across the table and looked at Braeme, smiling at his defensive attitude.

"Go ahead, man, and tell us about it," he said.

"It must be interesting from the way you take it. Did she treat you badly, old fellow?"

Braeme's eyes rolled from one to the other, a questioning, resentful look in their glassy sheen. He seemed to be trying to place the men about him, to remember their names, and then, as it flashed over him that he had only met them the day the boat sailed, he threw back his head and laughed boisterously. Finally he leaned forward on the table, his head in his hands.

"I don't care if you know," he said, the words coming in half articulate, maudlin tones. "All the world knows — at least the world that calls itself my friends. So what difference does it make if a few of you nobodies know it?" He laughed again as he saw the flush of resentment on the faces about him. "But I don't blame her — she couldn't help it. She did not bargain for a drunkard when she married me, and I was one, even then. But you see it kept getting worse and worse, and when she

would look at me with those great brown eyes of hers so full of contempt — I just couldn't stand it any longer. I told her I'd go away and leave her alone if she wanted me to — and finally she said she did."

He brushed his hands through his hair impatiently and called for another glass of champagne. The waiter held it to his lips as he drank. The men about the table, clinging to their seats as the boat rolled from side to side, did not interrupt him. Even in their half-intoxicated condition, they felt that what the man was telling them was the tragedy of his existence.

"I did go away for a long time — two years," he continued, in an even more reckless tone, "but I had to come back to see her again. I couldn't resist the temptation. I went back to New York, but I kept away from any chance of meeting her. All I wanted was just to see her once more — to know that what I had done had made her happy. Finally — I saw her. It was at the opera one night — about two weeks ago, now." He hesitated, as if lost in the memory, and for a while seemed unable to continue. "I saw her sitting in a box with some of her friends. A whole crowd of men were coming and going between the acts, yet she didn't seem to be interested in them, and once, when she turned towards me, — my God! she was beautiful! I saw that old expression in her eyes. I knew that she was still unhappy — and all through me. That night I swore to myself that I would go away and never come back. Her life shall be as free of me as if I had never come into it. Do you hear? I am going away forever! — forever!"

He jerked a glass from the table and vainly attempted to hold it steadily as he stood up.

"Now, we'll drink to no return," he cried, looking wildly around at them.

"And to her beautiful brown eyes," one of the men added quickly.

Braeme looked at the fellow intently for a moment; then the glass fell from his hand and smashed into a hundred pieces on the table.

"You dog — you have no right to speak of her at all — do you hear? Take that!" And he leaned quickly across the table and gave the man a blow that sent him staggering to the floor.

George had sat close to Braeme as he told the story, listening attentively. Since the first moment that he had heard his name called he had decided to let nothing interfere with his knowing the man. He began to count the days left before the voyage would be over; four days gone left many before him in which to cement a relationship which he had decided on as he listened to the story. In the midst of these thoughts and his listening had crashed Braeme's violent act.

George watched him as he staggered to the door and put his hand on the knob.

"You had better not go out that way, sir," a waiter remonstrated. "Come through the passage here, sir, and I'll get you to your room."

Braeme turned a glowering look on the man.

"No, I'm going this way. Do you understand? I want to get out of this beastly hot room, and I don't want to be followed either. Do you hear?"

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He opened the door and passed out. The waiter looked at the men questioningly.

"There's a terrible storm out, gentlemen. The sea is running clear over the deck. Can't you persuade him to come back?"

The others turned away indifferently.

"It won't make any difference. He won't get hurt. Did you ever hear of a drunken man that failed to come out of a scrape better than any one else? Come on — let's get back to our game."

The waiter shrugged his shoulders and cleared away the broken pieces of glass. A man at the table picked up the cards and began dealing, and the room settled down once more to quiet, broken only by the rolling of the ship, and the steady, muffled sound of fog horns.

Suddenly George sprang from his chair and went out of the door. An uncontrollable desire had gotten hold of him to follow Braeme and see what had become of him. It was evident that he was incapable of taking care of himself in his present condition; beyond that, it was almost like letting him go to his death to leave him alone on deck during such a storm.

When he had closed the door, George felt the rush of water about his feet. Grey mist obscured everything. He pushed his way along, looking for Braeme, and had almost decided that he had either been carried overboard or had reconsidered and entered through another door, when he discerned a dim outline just ahead of him. In the fog it moved from side to side with the rolling of the boat, and it seemed to George interminably long before he was able to

be certain that it was Braeme. Then, when he had decided that it was necessary to make a spring and jump to the man's side, the boat plunged high into the air, and as it righted itself, a huge wave swept the full length of the deck.

George clung with both hands to the rail until the wave had passed, leaving him drenched and gasping for breath. In the moment of waiting he strained his eyes into the mist and saw Braeme lying helpless in the middle of the deck. Another wave like the one just passed could easily wash him overboard.

George sprang towards him and dragged him to one side, then, placing him between himself and the rail, he put his hands out and clasped the cable on both sides, in this way holding himself and the other firmly.

The second wave came, heavier than the first, leaving them soaking, their mouths and nostrils choking with salt water.

For the first time the danger of the situation came over George, and as he held on tightly to the rail, waiting for the help which it seemed would never come, he began to question what he had done. He was risking his own life, that was perfectly clear to him now, and simply to carry out a part of a scheme which he deemed indispensable. But it was exhilarating, he cried to himself, laughing, and as a third wave broke over them, he began to feel an intense joy in the excitement.

Finally, Braeme began to recover from the fall which had stunned him, and spoke :

" Let me go now. I'm all right. This cold water

is enough to sober anybody. You make for that door over there and pound on it till some one opens it. I'm safe enough here till you get back."

George saw what he meant and, following his suggestion, made a spring across the deck to the door. He called and kicked before any sound of help came; then, as the light rushed out and flooded the deck, Braeme came unsteadily into the cabin.

"Give me your arm — will you," he said, leaning on George heavily. "You'll have to help me to my room." He grasped George's arm and indicated the direction. When they had entered the state-room, Braeme tumbled headlong on to the bed.

"Ring for the steward, please, and tell him to send my man here. He can help me turn in. You needn't bother any more. Thank you for your assistance. It was a pretty cold deal we got out there on deck, wasn't it?"

He turned over on his face as he finished speaking and lay quiet. George pushed the electric button, and, while waiting for the steward, looked with keen interest about the room. It was one of the largest cabins on the boat, roomy and luxurious in its furnishings, and strewn with many evidences of the traveler's taste and wealth.

The incidents of the past few minutes crowded about him insistently. To think that he had stumbled on this knowledge of what her life had been! In some way, he felt intuitively that it was going to be a weapon in his hands which he could use against her. Not that any plan had yet formed itself in his mind that seemed possible; it would be a

year or more before he saw her again, and by then the way would have come to him.

The steward at the door jarred upon his thoughts.

"Mr. Braeme wants his valet at once. Will you kindly see that he comes?"

George gave the order and hurriedly turned back to the room. He fingered the objects on the dresser absently, still under the influence of his discovery. He took up a leather portfolio, thoughtlessly looking at the artistic design on the cover, when a photograph slipped out and lay face up on the floor. He stooped and picked it up, then, with a gasp of surprise, he looked at Braeme, who had fallen into a deep sleep and lay motionless on the bed.

George stepped quickly to the door and closed it, then walked back and held the photograph up to the light. The luminous, cold glitter crept into his eyes as he gazed at it. After a long time he placed the photograph back in the portfolio and went out of the room, closing the door quietly after him.



CHAPTER X

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

THE splendour of late afternoon glowed upon the terrace, bringing into dazzling brilliance a fragment of wall, a stone bench, a clump of cedars massed against one end of the long, rambling house, and leaving in warm shadow a corner where some rugs and a table and chairs formed a quiet spot from which one could look out upon the gently rolling country just beginning to show the faint grey-green of spring. On the crests of adjacent hills, and rising out of groves of trees, the roofs and towers of distant residences loomed, silhouetted like old châteaux against the vivid sky; and in a narrow valley far below lay a village, snug and warm and protected from the outside world. In the spaciousness of the scene, no distinctive or sudden landmark jarred upon the effect of unlimited distance, so that over it breathed that spirit that calls to thought to rise and soar above immediate surroundings.

Mildred Braeme sat in one of the lounge chairs, indifferently turning the pages of a magazine and occasionally resting her eyes from the pages by looking out across the hills. Twice she glanced at her watch, hidden in the laces of her waist, and finally rose and walked to the end of the terrace and back again.

Two years had brought no change in her. There

was still the striking beauty of face and figure, still the look of intelligence and force subdued by the unhappiness that showed in her eyes. Her gown, unpronounced and simple in its perfect lines, enhanced the effect of elegance that was so distinctly a part of her personality. There seemed to emanate from her an indefinable atmosphere of refinement and cultivation; it showed in her low, modulated voice, in her perfect simplicity and unobtrusive aloofness, in her always perfectly chosen costumes; it left its impression in a hundred little ways which could not be remembered afterwards. Yet, in this refinement, there was nothing to suggest the effete; her evident virility, her lithe, graceful movements, the alert, intelligent mind which glowed in her fine eyes, showed that, with the cultivation that comes from a long line of ancestors accustomed to worldly goods, was blended a nature sensible to everything and a will not easily overcome.

Once, in her walking, she stopped and waved her hand to a young man and a girl climbing up the hillside with golf bags swung across their shoulders.

"What time is it?" called Walter Emery.

"Nearly five o'clock," Mildred answered, glancing at her watch.

"Oh, then I've got lots of time," Walter said, when he had reached the terrace and thrown himself into the nearest chair. "The train doesn't come until six. I am disgusted, Mildred. Don't you think Edith beat me again? I'm all out of form lately. Been working too hard, I suppose."

The young girl who had come with him, blonde and thin and becomingly tanned, with that look of

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outdoor life about her which we used to call English, glanced at Mildred and laughed.

"Can't we see him working too hard, poor boy. But, I say, Mildred," she added, "may we have tea out here? It's too gorgeous to go inside."

"Of course you may, if your future lord and master is not too exhausted to tell Bankston to bring us the tea things."

"It's an effort," Walter groaned, rising, "but I believe it's worth it."

Edith leaned over Mildred, where she had sat down again, and glanced at her watch.

"One hour more," she sighed impatiently. "Do you know, Mildred, I can hardly wait."

Mildred looked up at her quickly.

"For what, Edith?"

"Why, for this George Thorne to arrive. Since Walter came back I've heard nothing but George Thorne did this and George Thorne did that, and so on without any let-up. I know I'm going to hate him, just because Walter likes him so much. I heard you say you had seen him once. Did you like him?"

Mildred looked away indifferently, and seeing Walter and a footman arriving with the tea things, turned the subject without answering.

"I was just asking Mildred what she thought of George Thorne, Walter," Edith began again, when she was comfortably seated with a cup in one hand and a double portion of toast in the other. "I can hardly wait to know if I'm going to like him or despise him. It's bound to be one or the other."

"Do you know, Mildred," Walter laughed, with

a glance at Edith, "I really don't know if I'm wise in letting Edith meet George Thorne or not. He's entirely too attractive — and so is she. What do you think about it?"

"I think it is too late to question it now; he will be here in less than an hour. However — I don't think you need be worried — do you, Edith?"

Edith's eyes danced mischievously.

"One can never tell," she answered, assuming seriousness. "From what Walter has told me, Mr. Thorne must be worlds more attractive than he is."

Walter frowned at her a moment, then both of them laughed happily.

"Well — I'm going to try not to be afraid. But I don't deny he is more attractive than I. Don't you think so, Mildred?"

Mildred filled his cup before answering.

"You take three lumps of sugar, don't you?"

"No — four. That's an unforgivable slip of yours, Mildred; one should always remember how many lumps of sugar one's friends take in their tea. But don't be afraid to answer — I'm not sensitive, you know."

Finally Mildred met Walter's glance, and her brows drew together almost imperceptibly.

"I only saw him once. One can't get much of an impression in that way."

"That's a good theory to use towards most people," Walter cut in, "but it doesn't fit George Thorne. He impresses you whether you want to be or not, and you know he did you, only you're always trying to be so indifferent about everything."

Mildred laughed and turned towards Edith.

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"Do you think, Edith, that because he's going to marry you and become my cousin," with a toss of her head towards Walter, "that I should permit him to grow insulting?"

Edith leaned forward spontaneously and took hold of Mildred's hand.

"He's right in a way, dear. I do wish you wouldn't be so terribly bored with everything. Now, for instance, why not go to the Golf Club dinner with us to-night? You aren't a bit older than Walter, and one would think you were his mother. I mean," and she broke into a merry laugh, "you act that way — not that you look it."

Mildred put out the alcohol lamp and leaned back in her chair, answering Edith's laughter with a forced smile.

"Seriously, though," Edith resumed, "what was your impression of him?"

"Really, Edith, he did not strike me very much either one way or the other," Mildred's answer came guardedly, "except that he was an impossibly crude young fellow out of a class I have never known, Western at that."

Walter smiled broadly.

"Isn't she exclusive, Edith? I'm awfully glad I'm going to be in the family soon. Maybe I'll learn, too, how to wipe people right off the slate. Will you teach me, Mildred?"

"Did you expect me to rave about him, Walter?" Mildred answered leniently.

"No — but you will when you see him again. You never saw such a metamorphosis, and such a quick one too. Before we had gotten half way

across the Pacific he was already showing the effects of old Lane's work. And the way he was keen about everything and everybody, and in that quiet way of his too. Never the least bit of a pusher — but yet got there every time. Lane used to make him read aloud for an hour or two every afternoon, correcting him all the time, so as to rub off that Western flavour that you dislike so much. And then they used to have terribly long chats and arguments until I was bored to death. The chap is such a queer combination; he's awfully good fun at times, but at heart I believe he's confoundedly serious. To be such a crude chap in many ways — I mean our ways — he seems to have done a lot of reading and studying."

Mildred listened earnestly beneath her outward show of indifference. When Walter had finished, she looked up with a slight smile.

"And what part did you play in his development, Walter?"

"I? Oh, I had the decorative side — the — " airily — "manners of the day, I suppose you'd say."

Edith broke into a gay laugh.

"Good heavens! Then I'm afraid to meet him. I know he is a wonder."

"But you both know what I mean," Walter went on seriously. "He had never seen our sort of life, and he was vastly ignorant of all the little things. I can't explain to you exactly. At least, I could, but it would take too long. You understand, don't you? Little things like ordering a dinner, how to wear your clothes, — oh thousands of things that

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we never think about, because we've always known 'em."

"What a wonderful opportunity for him!" sighed Edith, her hands clasped in mock seriousness.

"Laugh if you please — it was a serious enough matter to him. But the way he caught on was wonderful. He's bully good looking to start with, and when he had got into some good clothes, and got shaped up a bit, he had a distinction, a sort of individuality, that made people notice him. Besides, he always has a certain quiet, easy dignity about him that I suppose I'll never have. Just for that reason people kept taking me for a kid and him years older."

Walter smiled at his listeners. "Anyhow — I'm awfully glad he's coming back, for I grew to like him immensely. He's so different from any chap I ever knew before."

For a few moments they were silent, Mildred looking out steadily across the hills, Edith occupied with tapping the slabs of the terrace with a golf club.

"What I like about him most out of all you've told me about him," Edith finally broke the silence, "is the way he acted that time on the boat."

Walter caught her eye quickly and shook his head. Mildred saw the signal, and for a second her face went pale.

"What was that, Walter? I never heard about it," she said quickly.

Walter dug a cigarette case from his pocket, and lazily lighted a match.

"Oh, it's a long story. I'll tell you some other time."

"I should like to hear it now. You have plenty of time."

"Well — if I miss meeting him on that six o'clock train, I'll tell him it was your fault." He drew at his cigarette luxuriously, trying to make a whiff of smoke reach to Edith.

"If it hadn't been for him, though, that fellow would have been overboard."

Walter rushed on with a glowing account of George's experience with Hampton Braeme, painting the incident in enthusiastic, glowing colours. "After that," he ended, breathless with his flow of words, "Thorne was a regular hero on the boat."

Mildred lowered her eyes when Walter stopped. It was a full half minute before she replied.

"I hardly call that so very brave," she said slowly. "It was more foolhardy. If the man were drunk, and the sort I imagine, from what you say, why risk a life to save him? What happened afterwards?"

Walter flushed, then frowned at her reception of the story. It was not her custom to scoff at manliness, and it puzzled him.

"Afterwards? Oh, he made a lifelong friend of the man; in fact, he was devoted to Thorne all the rest of the voyage. Indeed, he was with us a good part of the trip in India, and when we separated and met again in Paris, he made a point of looking Thorne up to take him around with him."

"Then it proved an advantage to him — to risk his life, as you call it, to save this man?"

"An advantage?" Walter drew his brows together questioningly. "Yes, I suppose you would call it that. Why do you ask?"

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"Oh — for no particular reason. I only wanted to know." Mildred looked away, and then turned directly towards him.

"You speak of meeting this man afterwards — was he at all a possible person?"

Once more a glance passed between Walter and Edith, leaving both of them with flushed faces.

"I mean," Mildred continued quickly, "was he a man you, too, enjoyed being with?"

"Yes — to be perfectly frank — I did. We saw a great deal through him that we would not have seen otherwise. But to go on about George Thorne."

"Wait a minute," Mildred interrupted, "Uncle Winston told me that you had written him that my — that Hampton Braeme was on the same boat with you. Could — he have been the man you spoke of?"

"Yes, Mildred, it was Mr. Braeme. I ought not to have told you anything about him."

Mildred leaned back in the chair more easily. The colour had gone out of her face now leaving her eyes brilliant.

"I thought so," she said thoughtfully. "Did this Thorne know he was Hampton Braeme? I mean, did he know it before he went out on deck after him?"

"Yes, naturally; I told him who Braeme was."

"Ah, I see. But go on, Walter, don't mind telling me. Indeed, I want to know about their companionship."

Walter drew a breath of relief and stared first at Edith, then at Mildred.

"Really — you know," he stammered, "I don't

think we'd better talk about it any more. I'm awfully sorry I mentioned it, Mildred."

"But you need not be," she forced a smile as she met his eyes. "I want you to tell me all you know. I insist."

"There isn't much for me to tell you, except that Mr. Braeme took quite a fancy to Thorne, and while we were in Paris, I heard him ask him to go to the Riviera with him for two weeks. Whether he went or not, I don't know, for I left to come home the next day, and, as you know, Thorne remained over there six months longer, and he never mentioned Mr. Braeme in the letters I have had from him. That's really all there is to tell. But, do you know, Mildred, somehow you give me the idea that you don't like Thorne."

"Perhaps that's your imagination. Why should I like or dislike him?"

"I hope I am mistaken, because I'd hate for you to take a prejudice against him before you know him, for he's the right sort and a lot more interesting than a majority of people one meets nowadays. You and he ought to hit it off splendidly together. He likes the things you do, and although he's just beginning to see the things you've always known, the way he adapts himself and understands is astonishing. He can turn me down every time on art and things like that. I don't mean that he talks about 'atmosphere' and 'colour' and all those phrases that you and Edith use to make people think you know what you're talking about, but he gets at the bottom of what the thing represents and can tell you in that way if it's good or not. I used to

think I knew it all, and when we were loafing through those blasted miles of pictures he'd always end up by picking out something that the guide books didn't mention, and begin explaining to me how it impressed him, and in such a way, by Jove, that I'd get interested in spite of myself. I remember one day we had an appointment to meet at the Panthéon in Paris. Well, when I drove up, there was Thorne, standing for all the world as if he had forgotten anybody else was living, before that statue of Rodin's — Le Penseur — I believe they call it. You know, the barbarian chap who is all hunched up and trying to think for the first time. Will you believe it? — I couldn't get Thorne away from the thing. I used to jolly him about it afterwards — for I found him there again one day — and tell him that it must have been some personal application to attract him so. Once he turned on me with the queer look he has in his eyes at times and told me to shut up — that it was the personal application that interested him. Now, what do you know about that?"

Mildred's hands lay idly in her lap, her eyes lowered.

"Perhaps," she said thoughtfully, "perhaps he had begun to think too."

"Begun?" Walter exclaimed, "I think he's done his share of thinking already."

"But in a new direction. I mean — perhaps he has been awakened to a realisation of something he has done."

Walter threw away his cigarette and leaned forward more earnestly.

"That reminds me, Mildred, what is exactly his hold on the Livingstones? He never would talk about them, and the only thing the old man told us about him before we sailed was that he was interested in giving the young fellow the trip and the benefit of good company. That's all either Lane or I ever knew about the situation. But there's something queer about the whole thing. I don't want you to think I'm telling tales out of school — it's just between you and Edith and me — but there was hardly a week went by that Thorne did not receive a letter from Mrs. Livingstone. He never told me, you understand, but naturally I knew her hand-writing. The strange part of the whole thing, though, is, that invariably after he had got one of her letters he seemed to have a spell of the blues, or got into a nasty humour and would keep away from Lane and me sometimes for a whole day. And once — Mildred, strictly between ourselves, I saw him tear up one of her letters without reading it and throw it away. Now, what does it all mean? Of course you know, and even if it isn't my affair, I'd like immensely to be put next."

Mildred had listened intently, and when Walter ended with the direct question, she glanced at her watch and then rose abruptly.

"If you're going to meet your friend, you had better hurry. It is a quarter to six, and there is the motor waiting for you."

Walter jumped out of his chair and grabbed his hat.

"Which means, I suppose," he said with a laugh, "that you know and won't tell."

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"Yes, Walter," Mildred faced him seriously, "I do know, but I am not at liberty to tell you. I think, though, that you will know all about it very soon."

"Oh, all right, I'll be patient — as always. Until later. Edith, don't forget that we're dining at the Golf Club at eight."

Edith slipped out of her chair and ran after him.

"What do you think of my going with you to meet Mr. Thorne, Walter? You know the Martins are coming on the same train — that'll be excuse enough for me to go; and if I don't see him before dinner I shall have to wait until to-morrow."

"Of course, jump in," Walter cried, holding open the door to the car.

At the station they strolled up and down the platform, Edith's arm lightly linked in Walter's.

"You know, I've half a mind to ask him to be my best man."

Edith drew her brows together.

"Perhaps it will be better to wait a little longer. Mildred evidently knows something about him, and I don't believe she likes him for some reason."

"Oh, that's Mildred's way," Walter tossed his head impatiently. "Just because she made a muddle of her own affairs she has taken a bitter attitude towards the rest of the world. You wait till you see him — you'll agree with me."

A long pause, while a shrill whistle announced the coming train.

"Has he a sweetheart, Walter?"

"A sweetheart!" Walter threw back his head and laughed. "Great heavens, no!"

"Is there anything to laugh at in that?"

"Yes — a lot, if you knew George Thorne. I asked him once if he'd ever been in love, and he said that he had never had time to think about it — that he had never seen but one woman that he thought he could love, and he could not love her because he hated her."

"That sounds like romance."

"The fellow himself is pure romance."

When the train stopped, a porter emerged from the sleeper, staggering under the weight of many bags; after him came a stout, middle-aged man followed by a conspicuously well-dressed woman, and then a younger woman with a bright, attractive face. The last one to emerge from the car was a tall, slender young man in a long coat and soft grey hat. There was a quiet good style in his whole appearance, particularly in the easy, graceful carriage of the head and shoulders. His face was an interesting combination of youth and age — one could hardly tell which predominated at first glance, for in the fresh, healthily tanned skin, unlined and smooth, and the light-coloured, vigorous hair, there was nothing to suggest anything but the virility of youth. It was the calm, steady expression of the dark grey eyes and the determined set of the lips which gave the impression of that experience which only age brings. Two striking characteristics showed predominantly in his appearance, — the effect of luxury and the restraining influence of great strength, the two forming a personality that made itself felt at once and caused one to wonder to what extent the latter had been used.

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As Walter started forward to meet him, Edith caught him by the sleeve.

"Is that George Thorne?" she exclaimed. And then, as Walter nodded, "Well — I can't understand why Mildred shouldn't like him. I think he's fascinating."

CHAPTER XI

AFTER TWO YEARS

WALTER pushed his way through the group and grasped George's hand with a hearty clasp. "By Jove, but I'm glad to see you. You know Mrs. Martin, of course. No? You don't mean to say you've all been traveling together to the same place and haven't met? Mrs. Martin, Mr. Thorne and Miss Neilson." Walter hurried on with the introductions as he led them towards the motor cars. "And this is Edith Webster — whom you know by reputation if not by sight. Now, all of you bundle in as best you can."

When three had been safely stored away in one car and started off, Edith and Walter and George followed in the second.

"Yes — I think I do know you by reputation," George said to Edith, who was sitting between him and Walter, "and very well too. The descriptions were so glowing they made a lasting impression."

Edith looked at him intently a moment, then her eyes suddenly fell. She was still wondering why Mildred did not like him.

"That's Walter's habit," she answered gayly. "He always uses strong colour. And it suits sometimes," she added, with a flashing smile.

"I object," cried Walter, reaching across and slapping George on the knee. "Don't let her begin

flirting with you from the start, old man. It's her habit, and being engaged to me doesn't seem to make a bit of difference."

George laughed easily; then glanced across the view of hills and valley filled with the swiftly changing lights of sunset. For a moment it seemed to catch his attention and hold it, so that he did not at once answer the question Walter put to him about his arrival; however, it only lasted for a few seconds and he took his part in the conversation that followed as gayly as the others. In the quick fire of questions and answers Edith leaned back and drew her coat closely about her, for with the onrush of night had come a cold wind; and all the time she was trying to decide what her opinion was of the man Walter liked so much. Once, when there was an opportunity, she put in a question ahead of Walter's.

"I hope you're going to be here through the week, Mr. Thorne. We're having some awfully good golf."

The question seemed to take George by surprise, for he gave her and Walter a swift glance before replying.

"Yes — I think I shall be here that long," he said slowly. "Though I really don't know. Is there much of a house party? I didn't know any one was here now."

"Oh, it's not really a house party at all. Walter and I are spending the week as Mrs. Braeme's guests, and the Martins and Miss Neilson are only here for the week-end. Of course you know Mrs. Braeme practically lives with the Livingstones now. You have met her, I believe?"

George did not answer at once, and as his eyes shifted, his lips tightened noticeably.

"I think I did meet her once," he said finally, after a slight pause, "but I doubt if she remembers me. It was only for a few moments." Then quite easily, "I remember her as being rather tall, with dark hair and eyes."

"Yes — that is she. I'm sure you wouldn't forget her if you had once seen her. She was the beauty of her set. Though now, one rarely sees her."

"Why is that?" George's eyes were looking directly into hers.

Edith glanced at Walter, then back at George.

"She doesn't go out any more," she answered, seemingly a little embarrassed. "Occasionally I make her chaperone me at the opera."

Edith felt George's eyes still insistently bent on her.

"Then she is in mourning?"

"In mourning! Heavens, no. Why did you think that?"

"What are you two talking about anyhow!" Walter exclaimed. "Edith, let me talk some now, will you? Thorne, what became of the old duck in the hotel at Paris? — the old East Indian, wasn't he? — that said you ought to study hypnotism?"

They had reached the top of the hill now, and the valley lay unrolled below them. The village spires and windows, gleaming in the vivid light, came into the scene; lights began to twinkle in the gathering dusk; and far off came the sound of the departing train like a prolonged hiss upon the evening quiet.

The car turned from the main road, and rolling through a gateway, sped on down a smooth drive bordered on both sides by a low hedge, over which showed an extent of spacious lawn. Gradually the glow of many lights sifted through the foliage, and as the car came into a sweeping curve, the house loomed, warm and hospitable, out of the chilly twilight.

The others who had gone ahead were still standing in the broad shaft of light from the main door when Walter sprang out of the car and held his hand to Edith. Left a little behind them, George fell back a step with the intention of waiting till the greetings of the first arrivals were over and they had passed on into the house, but while formulating this plan, he saw the tall figure of Mr. Livingstone silhouetted against the light, and seemingly peering out into the dark above the heads of the others. In a moment George changed his mind and went directly up to him.

With his hand clasped in the older man's, his face in the full glare of the hall lights, George felt that the searching black eyes that he had remembered so well were reading him through and through, though the pressure of his hand was warmer and kinder.

"So you're back at last," Mr. Livingstone said, after a barely perceptible pause. "You have changed. I don't believe I should have known you if I had not been expecting you."

"I came as soon as I got your cable. You understood that?"

"Yes — yes — but come in."

Up to this time they had been standing on the porch, left alone by the others who had gone on into

the house, and with the last words Mr. Livingstone rested his hand on George's arm and together they walked into the hall.

It was a spacious room, filled with comfortable, informal looking furniture; rugs and plants, a few good paintings and softly shaded lamps gave it, through obvious luxuriousness, a homelike appearance essentially different from and less formal than a city home. For the moment there was no one visible, though from an adjoining room came the sound of voices and laughter. Suddenly George's manner changed to one of acute listening.

"My wife is in here with her friends," Mr. Livingstone said, his hand still on George's arm, and going towards the open door. "She told me to bring you right to her."

George drew his arm from the other's hold and stopped.

"Would you mind very much if I did not go in there just now?" his voice lowered slightly. "I think — I think I should prefer to go to my room first."

"You are tired from your trip?" Mr. Livingstone asked kindly.

"No, I am perfectly well. Only —"

"Of course, if you prefer. Here, Bankston, show Mr. Thorne to his room." Then to George, as he walked with him to the foot of the broad staircase, "We dine at eight. You have plenty of time. I shall come by your room for you."

He held out his hand to George again and smiled at him. "I am very, very glad you have come — for my wife's sake — and for my own."

As George followed Bankston and disappeared in the gloom of the upper hall, Mrs. Livingstone came quickly through the drawing-room door. Seeing Mr. Livingstone alone she stopped, and the bright look of expectancy in her eyes went out.

"He did not come, Winston?"

"Oh yes — he's here."

"Where is he?"

"He wanted to go to his room first. I think it was the crowd in there with you that he hesitated meeting. Perhaps he is a little tired."

Mrs. Livingstone sank into a chair.

"How does he look? Is he well?"

"Yes — but changed; wonderfully changed."

"How? What do you mean?"

"You would not know him for the same boy. But — it's all for his good."

Mrs. Livingstone rose again and came nearer her husband.

"Winston, why didn't you bring him to me? How can I wait? I wish all these people had stayed at home. Go to him, Winston, and tell him to come to me now. I shall wait for him alone in the library."

Mr. Livingstone smiled at her and took hold of her hand.

"I told him to take his time about dressing — that I would come by his room for him later. Don't you think you can wait that long?" he ended smiling happily.

"Ah, it is easy enough for you to say that — you have seen him. But I — I have been waiting two long years. No — I have been waiting twenty-two.

But don't wait too long to go to him; I shall be in the library and alone."

In the meantime the footman led the way along the upper hall to what seemed a wing of the large house. As he opened the door and stood to one side, George entered the room and glanced about the spacious apartment, then went directly to the group of windows which formed a bay at one corner, and stood where the cool evening breeze blew over him. He stood there a few seconds looking out into the darkness while Bankston gave directions for the placing of his trunks which had just arrived.

"Shall I unpack your things, sir?" a valet asked, who had followed Bankston into the room.

"Yes, please," George replied without looking around, "and put out my evening things. Dinner is at eight, I understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I have plenty of time," George said, turning from the window and going back to the middle of the room where the light fell full upon his face. For a while he stood there, silently watching a man deftly unpack his trunks and place the contents carefully away in the dresser and closets. While he stood there, Bankston appeared in the doorway.

"You have everything now, sir? Is there anything more I can do?"

"Bankston," George replied, lighting a cigarette and blowing the smoke slowly through his nostrils, "Bankston, it's odd that I remember you so well, and you don't seem to have any idea who I am."

The old servant looked at him quizzically.

"I am sorry, sir, but I don't remember you, sir,"

his tone apologetic. "It does seem to me though, sir, that I've seen somebody that looks like you." He stopped and looked intently at George, who returned his gaze with an amused expression.

"Possibly that some one was I," George suggested.

"No, sir," Bankston replied, shaking his head firmly. "He was just a nobody who came to the house about two years ago and asked to see Mr. Livingstone. He looked so cold and starved out that I let him in, and for a wonder, sir, the old gentleman talked to him for a long time. And now that I think of it, he came to dinner twice afterward."

"And you have never seen him since?" George asked, directing the valet in the placing of his silver toilet articles.

"No, sir, he never came back there any more. It's been over two years, if I remember aright, sir."

"And you think I look something like him?" George glanced directly at him.

Bankston's manner was decidedly apologetic now.

"Oh no, sir, only there was something about your eyes that made me think of him when I first saw you. I hope you won't misunderstand, sir. Now, if you'll ring the bell if you want anything, sir, I'll go." He turned and then waited as if to be dismissed.

"Oh yes, thank you, I'll ring. You may go now," and to the valet who had finished his task, "and you. If I need you again I'll let you know."

He stood in the center of the room after the others had gone, seemingly sunk into an oblivion of reflec-

tion; then, quickly, as if with an effort, he pulled himself together and going to a cheval glass turned on an electric light so that his face and figure were in the full glow. After a long look at his reflection he turned away and threw himself heavily into a cushioned chair. "Is it possible, George Thorne," he mused, a slight sigh escaping him, "that two years have made such a wonderful change in you?"

He looked about the room from his comfortable position with a smile of contentment. Everything surrounding him was so pleasing to his appreciation which the past years of broad experience had made discerning. He noted the good grouping of prints upon the walls, the delicately flowered wall paper with its design repeated in the chintzes of the curtains and bed-hangings, the old bed with its twisted columns and rose silk coverlet, the comfortable divan and chairs about the room, and beyond through a doorway, the white and blue tiled bathroom. A bowl of violets on the table, where a reading lamp and some uncut magazines were invitingly placed, completed the effect of luxury and taste.

He lay back and closed his eyes. How strange it all was, his scheme of two years before, the interest he had aroused in these people, his wonderful trip in which the memories were already falling together in kaleidoscopic confusion, his impressions, thousands of them, and the birth of new ideas, new thoughts, new instincts; — and now his return and the assured evidences of a hearty welcome. "I am glad you're back, for my wife's sake — and my own!" Was not that all that he could desire? — was it not sufficient assurance that everything was going

splendidly? A wave of impatience swept over him, followed quickly by reluctance, to know what they had planned — what the immediate future would bring. The two factors of doubt loomed as steadily as ever over the picture — Barton and Mrs. Braeme; and again, a more disturbing, more searching uncertainty than either of these — the knowledge that an influence over him had been growing, an irresistible force that was sapping his self-confidence, his strength, his power of self-control.

He remembered the moment it had sprung into life during that first interview when Mrs. Livingstone had come into the room and directly up to him; then its return during those three weeks of waiting; and the strength of it, its almost irresistible power, when he had stood in the hall and she had laid her hands on his shoulders and kissed him. That had only been the beginning. Afterwards, when he found a letter from her awaiting him just before he sailed, and another quickly following him into a distant country, he knew that that was to be the battle that would be waiting for him at each turn. Barton and Mrs. Braeme sank into insignificance; they understood him, they were frankly against him, he knew how to meet them; but this other, this one in whom he had awakened a great love and who was already willing to lavish upon him the affection of many years of yearning; — there lay his great danger. Still her letters came, week after week, as irregular as their travels might become they seemed to follow him with supernatural insistence. There was something uncanny in them, awakening all that past through which he had struggled and starved

and been honest; they brought to him new ambitions, new resolutions, and the growing desire, which sometimes terrified him with its penetrating voice, to write to her and tell her that it was all a lie — that he was not her son. Sometimes he laughed himself into fresh courage, calling himself a fool, a weakling, a coward. Why let such a thought dwell in his mind? Why not combat it successfully, as he did the others? He had conquered his honesty easily enough, and that had been a habit of twenty-four years — why not conquer the influence of this woman? After all, it was only an unhealthy imagination. Closely following this realisation had come a hatred of her letters. Sometimes he had carried them for days without reading them; twice he had destroyed them unread.

But now had come the necessity of meeting her, of standing in her presence, and of seeing in her eyes the love she had expressed to him in her letters; and he knew that he was not sure of himself. It was that which held him back when he entered the house — a desire to put it off as long as possible, to keep it in that future in which he attempted to make the stalking dangers grey and vague.

With sudden vehemence he forced himself to think of the other woman, the one who had so quickly detected the impostor in him. He began to speculate as to how she would receive him that evening, — if she would allude to their former conversation, or if she would accept the situation as settled. Then came the question if anything were really settled. He had never been told anything definite. So far, the principal concrete thing had been a friendly

interest which they might have given to any one towards whom they had been attracted.

The steady ticking of the clock on the mantel brought him suddenly out of his apathy. He stood up quickly, and stretching out his arms, felt the excitement of what was before him tingle through his whole body. It was in such moments that the zest of the game gave him a keen pleasure, when all but the matter of the moment sank into voiceless oblivion.

He had completed his toilet and was standing before the dresser placing some cigarettes in a case of quaint workmanship, when he heard a knock on the door. Calling out to enter, he completed his task as the door opened and Mr. Livingstone came into the room.

George looked up indifferently, expecting to see one of the footmen with a message for him.

"I didn't know it was you. I beg your pardon," he said hurriedly.

"I see you're ready. My wife is waiting for you."

George faced him with a pleasant smile of assurance, knowing intuitively that he was looking well. The severe black and white of his evening clothes showed off his slender figure to advantage and brought into stronger relief the pastel colouring of his skin and hair, suggesting a physical cleanliness that appealed to the senses; his splendid eyes, dominating his whole appearance, glowed deeper than usual and increased the cerebral effect of his personality — an effect which always remained after his physical charm had been forgotten.

"Your trip has done you good," Mr. Livingstone

said after a slight pause, during which he looked at George critically. "And the difference in you puzzles me greatly. I don't think I see, quite yet, what it is."

"Probably the difference is in seeing me in evening clothes, and after two years of traveling and new associations have taken off the rough edges; but, after all, I suppose I must be the same. It takes a longer time than that to make much difference."

Mr. Livingstone kept his eyes steadily on George as he listened. In reply to the last remark he shook his head.

"No — the change is deeper than a mere matter of clothes and travel. But I'm glad you've taken advantage of the opportunity I gave you. That speaks for itself; and it shows you know how to seize the opportunity. After my first conversation with you I felt that you would make a success if you were started in the right direction — I'm sure of it now."

George took a step towards the older man, his face brilliant with the encouragement his words had brought him.

"I do want to be successful," he answered enthusiastically, "and I want you to feel that I am ready to undertake anything that you have planned for me, not matter how difficult. I'm not afraid of work — I love it; in fact, I never worked harder in my life than I have on this trip; only, of course, it was a different kind of work — all intellectual. I know I have accomplished a great deal. But now," he hesitated a moment, "now, I want you to let me show you that I am worthy of your trust."

A knock on the door interrupted him.

"Mrs. Livingstone is waiting in the library, sir," the footman spoke to George.

"Very well," Mr. Livingstone replied, "tell her that Mr. Thorne is coming now." Then, turning back to George, "We shall have plenty of time to-morrow to discuss everything. I shall tell you then of something I have planned for you to do at once; that is why I cabled you to come back. But you had better go now. Mrs. Livingstone is anxious to see you."

He put his hand on George's arm, and they walked out of the room together. At the head of the steps Mr. Livingstone paused.

"We're having some friends for dinner this evening, besides those who came from the station with you; and Mrs. Braeme is staying with us. You remember meeting her before you went away, don't you?"

"Yes, I remember her perfectly."

Mr. Livingstone looked at George and smiled.

"I believe that she told you she doubted your story."

"Yes — does she still?"

"I don't know. She does not discuss you any more with us."

George stood squarely before Mr. Livingstone, their eyes on a level.

"I've often wondered why you trusted me," George said slowly, almost reflectively. "I had so little that was convincing."

"My dear fellow, that was just it," Mr. Livingstone answered easily. "You had nothing. It was your ingenuousness that showed you were telling the truth."

CHAPTER XII

A TWINGE OF CONSCIENCE

GEORGE came down into the hall alone, Mr. Livingstone having left him at the top of the steps, and as he hesitated in search of some one to direct him towards the library he saw Mildred Braeme standing alone near the table which filled the center of the hall. Her face was turned from him, but the light from the lamp near her aided him in recognising her at once. He stood undecided at first, while she continued sorting the mail which had just arrived, and waited a moment to see if she would look up and notice him. Several minutes passed. Evidently she had not heard him. Then he made a quick decision and walked directly towards her.

He was quite near before she looked up and saw him, and through the quick changes in her expression as she regarded him he was able to read her thoughts as if they had been spoken. At first there was only surprise, then followed swiftly a faint recognition, and as this settled into certainty, he felt before he saw it that her manner had instantly changed. It was the same as it had been the first evening he had met her, only then there had been a moment of softening when she had plead with him; now there was no suggestion about her of anything but cold hauteur. Even in the concentrating of his old anger and hatred towards her, he could not help but

feel her dazzling beauty. She seemed to him, while he looked at her, like some exquisite piece of marble that was impervious to anything he could ever say or do.

He stood a moment before her, her questioning silence unanswered; then he rested one hand on the table and smiled at her with quiet self-composure.

"So you still hold to that first impression?" he said, speaking slowly and looking directly into her eyes.

She looked down and placed several letters to one side before answering.

"There has been nothing to cause me to think otherwise," she replied, without looking up.

George waited a few moments, looking at her steadily all the while. Finally she pushed aside the letters and returned his look.

"Pardon me, but if you have nothing more to say, you will find Mrs. Livingstone in that room." She indicated a door across the hall. "I may as well say now, so you will not misunderstand later, that it is only courtesy for me to be polite to you while I am here. It is a duty I feel I owe to my relatives. But simply because you have imposed yourself on them is no reason for you to think I have any intention of accepting you as anything but what I think you are. I hope I have made myself perfectly clear."

She met his look steadily all the time she was speaking quite fearlessly, and with a frankness that brought the colour swiftly to his face. Falling back a step, he felt his hatred for her tingle through him, and words rushed to his lips that in a saner moment he would not have used.

"I understand perfectly," he said, his voice low and under control, "in fact I have understood your position from the very first. You look upon me as an interloper. It is only natural after you have considered yourself for years as the nearest relative, as the —" he hesitated barely a moment — "the only heir. Candidly, I believe I should act exactly as you are doing in the same situation."

She listened, frankly surprised, while her face flushed a dark red and her lips parted as if ready to answer him. Instead, she smiled slightly and turned away without saying anything and walked towards the other end of the hall. George remained by the table watching her until she had disappeared into another room; then, his eyes glowing bright with the certainty that her doubts counted no longer — she had practically admitted that — he crossed the hall towards the library.

The room was dimly lighted, with spots of light glowing here and there under dark red shades; a crackling fire shone through a brass screen and gleamed upon the leather furniture, leaving the greater part of the room in a quiet, restful gloom. George was quick to feel the influence of peacefulness in the quiet surroundings and stopped in the shadow of the threshold to give the emotions of the last few minutes an opportunity to subside. While he waited, his glance fell upon Mrs. Livingstone.

She was seated in a large chair, her head resting against one of the upholstered sides, one hand supporting her chin, the other lying across the arm of the chair. The attitude, the pose of the head, and

the slight suggestion of weariness told George quickly, with a subtle intuition that he always felt in her presence, that her life had been one of great loneliness. He noted her soft grey hair, so delicate against the faint colour of her cheeks; her hand as it lay listlessly on the arm of the chair seemed to him the frailest and most helpless he had ever seen; and the colour of her gown, a vague combination of mauve and grey, accentuated the impression of her that he had carried with him so constantly since the first time he had ever seen her — the impression of something spiritually beautiful and more insistent through its immateriality. The feeling of being completely in her power rushed over him again, only now, with her presence there before him, he experienced the new sensation of a great happiness stirring somewhere within him, a happiness that left him calm and contented. After all he had been mistaken, he said to himself as he stepped forward and stood beside her chair; it was not going to be difficult; her love was going to make it easy for him. All his fears had been imaginary.

"You see, I am back," he said, looking down at her, his figure silhouetted against the firelight so that she could not see his face distinctly.

With a startled exclamation she stood up and extended both her hands. George took them in his own, at first gently then more firmly as he felt their warm pressure, wondering all the time if she were going to kiss him as she had done when they parted. He hoped, for some reason he could not explain to himself, that she would not, and in the embarrassment of the moment he let go her hand and fell back

a step. A shade of disappointment passed over her face at the sudden action.

"Mr. Livingstone thinks that I am very much changed," he said hurriedly, anxious to get the situation into easy channels. "Do you?"

"I can't tell yet — you see, your face is in the shadow. Sit here, right beside me, so that I can see you."

She sank into her chair again and motioned him to take the low one beside her. He sat down and leaned a little forward, the firelight shining full across his features. He was very near to her now, and as he turned and met her eyes, he felt, with almost sharp intensity, the tenderness and love glowing in them.

"They were two very long years," she said slowly, her low voice coming to him like the sound of something ineffably sweet. "It seemed to me that you had forgotten to come back, and when you wrote us that you wanted to stay a few months longer, I began to feel that you had only come into my life to go out of it again. Do you realise what you have begun to mean to me?"

He turned away from her caressing glance, her question unanswered.

"Don't you think, perhaps," he began awkwardly, then slowly, "perhaps I only represent that something to you? Might it not be some one else just as well as I?"

"Look at me — you don't think that. And even if it were that way — it will not be so any longer. We are going to be together now, no more long separations. I told Winston the other day when he

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cabled you to come home so as to send you out West, that I was going with you."

"Does he want me to go West?" George interrupted hurriedly.

Mrs. Livingstone held up her hand playfully.

"We aren't going to talk a word of future plans yet," she went on smiling. "I want to hear about what you have done since I saw you; your impressions, your experiences. You enjoyed every moment of your trip, didn't you? — you had everything you needed?"

"More, much more than I needed. You and Mr. Livingstone could not have done more for me. Those you sent me with, and those I had letters to, seemed to consider it their duty to help me in every way. It was a wonderful experience!"

"Yes, we heard all about it. You did not disappoint us once."

"Then you kept up with me?" George laughed contentedly. "I am glad you did, though; just that you might know that I was taking advantage of the opportunities that you were giving me."

"But tell me," Mrs. Livingstone leaned back in her chair, and her eyes, dwelling on the firelight, grew dreamier in expression, "tell me something personal out of the mass of your impressions? I remember when I first went to Europe how some things stood out so much more than others. Tell me, out of your whole trip, what impressed you most?"

George linked his hands about his knee and followed the direction of her glance.

"What a difficult question!" he said thoughtfully.

"It should not be very difficult if you decided quickly. Let the whole panorama flash through your mind and then see what stands out most distinctly."

George stared before him into the fire, his eyes narrowing reflectively; then, with a sudden flash of enthusiasm he turned towards Mrs. Livingstone.

"I know now — and the odd part of it is, that it was the last thing I saw. It was Gibraltar."

"Gibraltar!" Mrs. Livingstone repeated, frankly puzzled. "I always thought it was so bleak and rugged."

"Yes, that's just it," George went on, his interest making him forget himself. "It is bleak and rugged, but strong and powerful, and capable of resistance. Just think how it has stood there for centuries and centuries, able to resist everything that has assailed it. The day I saw it for the last time a terrible storm was raging, the waves were dashing up against the rocky sides, the masses of clouds were pressing down on it from above, lightning was flashing and thunder was crashing out as if trying to break it asunder; and yet it stood there calm and grave and unconscious of all the strife about it, its rugged height towering above everything. In some way, I got an impression of a man besieged on all sides and yet able to stand and laugh at all the vain attempts to down him. It was magnificent!"

He stopped suddenly, realising that his enthusiasm had carried his voice to a higher pitch and that he was speaking in loud, strident tones.

Mrs. Livingstone leaned back in her chair, her hands clasped now in her lap, her eyes bent thought-

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fully upon him. There was a perceptible pause before she spoke again.

"You surprise me," she resumed. "I should never have thought of that. Yet — all of us see things so differently. The place I like the best was the Riviera. I believe I still do, indeed I wanted to join you there so much."

"I liked it too, at first, but in a week I seemed to have exhausted its charms. You know I spent two weeks at Nice, and when I left there I had the feeling that I was getting away from something artificial — a little too theatrical. Even the scenery and the villas and the wonderful colour of the Mediterranean became to me nothing but flimsy card-board painted in exaggerated colours. It's rather odd how things impress me," he continued, dropping once more into a thoughtful attitude. "We see so much in things what is in ourselves, I suppose. With me, it must be the influence of my early life asserting itself. After all, a man's most lasting impressions are gotten when he is between twelve and twenty."

"But they can be outgrown and overcome, if we are placed under another influence sufficiently strong. Don't you think so?" Her voice showed the inflection of anxiety.

"Sometimes I think that too, then again I feel that it is impossible." He looked at her quickly and caught the expression of her eyes which her voice had already shown. "I have often asked myself, since I have known you, how different a man I should have been if I had been with you during my early life. The idea came to me first, I think, when I began to get your letters." He stopped abruptly

with a sudden fear that her former influence was making him lose control of himself. With an almost evident effort he turned away from her eyes. Another moment and he felt the pressure of her hand on his and her voice that stirred him against his will.

"My letters — you were saying —"

"You see — I had never had any one write to me in that way before — it was all so new to me. At first I did not understand, then — and then — it came to me what I had lost — irremediably lost. They opened up a new world to me. They somehow —" he rushed on, his eyes blurred with the dizziness of the precipice — "somehow, they made me ashamed of myself."

Mrs. Livingstone's hand tightened on his.

"Don't say that," she said softly. "I am sure there is nothing of any consequence in your life that you should be ashamed of. Those words do not express your meaning." She ended with a smile of encouragement.

George looked at her wonderingly through a long silence.

"You see — as I said — it was so new to me; I had never known anything like your letters before. I could not realise that some one was actually taking an interest in me." He looked down at her slender fingers as they lay on his large hand. "I don't express myself well — I can't; in fact, I don't understand it — it's something almost mystic. No one else ever had this influence over me. I do not feel this way with Mr. Livingstone. But when I am with you, even when I think of you, I have an almost uncontrollable desire to tell you everything." His

voice trembled beyond his power, letting the words come broken and passionate. "I don't want to lie to you — I feel that I can't."

All the woman's pent-up love was shining from her eyes as she caressed George's hand with her own; and when she answered, the voice of some far off spirit world seemed to colour her words.

"I understand — perfectly. It is all very clear to me. You have found me after all those long years. You have found the greatest thing God can give. Don't you see? It is your instinct, the child's instinct, that has come to you after you have grown into a man — it is your mother's love. And now that you have found me at last — that we have found each other — you have, as you say, that desire to come to me and tell me everything. Ah! I know what it is! It is your hunger for sympathy, the feeling that at last you have found the one with whom there is no necessity for anything but perfect truth."

George lowered his head in his hands, his whole body trembling vibrantly; and in the moments of silence that lengthened between them, he felt the touch of her hand that lay caressingly on his head, a touch that burned him like that of a white-hot iron. In that moment came the first real pangs of his suffering. All the dormant love, all the chivalry, all the great good that is in every nature, stirred within him with a truer significance than he had ever been conscious of before. The past, with its thousand schemes of selfishness and egoism, stood out before him in its true nakedness. All those old dreams of self-aggrandizement shaped themselves

into faces and leered at him, calling to him that the success he had always wanted and had at last gained was to be his curse — his death. This knowledge which had begun its work so gradually during the past two years suddenly culminated and showed him, in the pitiless light of truth, his real self, and yet, with the agony of this vision, was blended the infinite joy of knowing that some one loved him for the first time in his life. Even that happiness had its sting, though, for it was not real — it was all builded upon a foundation that was already crumbling. It could not last. A few words would blot it out and leave only hatred in its place. Was nothing ever to be his? The early conviction that the country of his birth was typical of his life came back to him with double significance.

Involuntarily he reached out as a man who is drowning and grasped Mrs. Livingstone's hand in a painful grip. Then, with a supreme effort, he met her eyes. They were still bent upon him — quiet, affectionate, beautiful. How was it possible that she could not read the thoughts that were rushing through him, crushing out his spirit, speeding him on to his ruin.

He dropped her hand, rose, and going to the mantel leaned both elbows on the shelf so that his back was to her. It should not be, it should not be, he kept repeating to himself. He must not lose control of himself at the very time when everything was so nearly settled. It was only a momentary weakness, a craving to taste that love that he had never known, a desire that he must force out of his life forever if he wished to hold what he had already

gained. With the arrival of new difficulties he could combat it, of that he was sure, and they were coming; he felt them already predicted in her words about his going West. Already Barton's shadow had begun to loom across his path. That was what he needed — some one to fight. And if she would only antagonise him in some way, insult him as the other woman had done! It would be so easy to go on then as before. But this real confidence in him which she had shown from their very first meeting, this affection, this love — ah! that was what was undermining the foundation of his strength. He did not know how to battle with it and he did not want to lose it. Suddenly he trembled from head to foot. That was it. And the voice that was egoism thundered in his ears; he wanted to keep this love with all the rest.

He tried to clench his hands in a multitude of resolutions, but the strength seemed to have gone even out of his fingers. It was a physical, as well as moral, weakening. Everything was slipping away from him, leaving only the overpowering desire to tell this woman the truth.

Then, coming at first as a far off voice, and gradually growing nearer and nearer until it seemed to penetrate him like the blood in his veins, sounded the memory of her words in which she spoke of his right to have her love — the child's instinct. Could there be something in that which neither she nor he could ever know? — something that must always remain a mystery — unless — unless — Great God! he had never thought of that before! Why was it not possible? Why was it not something of that sort

that had drawn him to her — that had made her trust him at once? Perhaps it was that unmistakable tie of nature that is inexplicable. No — no — no. He was only seeking excuses — searching a way to deaden his torture.

He turned slowly from the mantel and looked at Mrs. Livingstone a second, then made a quick step towards her chair and sat down beside her.

"I must tell you something," the words came from his lips in a mad rush which he could not restrain. "I can't keep it from you any longer."

Mrs. Livingstone looked at him quickly, startled by the change in his face which was now strikingly evident.

"I don't want to tell you — and yet — I do," he went on, a strangely hard smile twisting his lips. "It's just that I can't keep from doing it — possibly — afterwards — you will understand."

A faint look crept into her eyes as she waited for him to continue. Possibly some dim hint of the truth had come to her, possibly his changed mind was full of foreboding to her, for now, as she waited, she saw his fingers sinking into the leather of the chair as if he were clinging to it for support.

He hesitated after the last words, silenced by the look of pain that was already on her face. With a flash he saw that what he was going to tell her would bring suffering to her, as well as to himself; and while he waited, she spoke.

"Don't say anything to me to-night that would cast the least shadow over my great happiness." Both her hands were on his now, and the affection in her eyes and voice embraced him. "After all the

long years of waiting you are with me at last. That is enough — just now. Don't let us in any way mar our great happiness. I cling to it so, that I only want to let it surround me, absorb me in an oblivion — if that were only possible. I am very foolish, perhaps you will say, but then, all mothers are, and I haven't many years to be with you, and I want to have those full — yes — full to overflowing; and it is with us to make them so. Now you understand why I do not want anything, not even the least little shadow, to come between us."

Georges eyes fell before her's. His head lowered, and as the gentle tones of her voice died away, he leaned forward and kissed her hands where they lay on his. Then suddenly, as he looked up again, her hands went to his shoulders and pulled him towards her, and she kissed him again and again.

"Aunt Constance!"

A voice and the hurried rustling of skirts broke the stillness of the room as Mildred Braeme entered. "Aunt Constance! Do you know that all your guests are in the drawing-room waiting for you?"

She stopped suddenly when she was close to them and looked at George, her brows drawing together with a puzzled expression. For a moment it seemed that she had been startled by a resemblance, a recognition of something familiar. Her eyes moved from George to Mrs. Livingstone, full of questions; then, as quickly as it had come, the look died out and she turned towards the door.

As he followed them out of the room, George felt a return of assurance with the knowledge that one

crisis had been safely passed ; also, he felt a deep contentment in the knowledge that he had been willing to tell, had even formulated the words upon his lips, when she had stopped him. The foolish voice of his conscience sank into a whisper and died away — appeased. He had been ready to speak and had been told to keep silent. The future was very plain now ; it was going to be easy enough with one woman's love and another's hatred — a combat in which his fighting qualities were to be brought into play as a steadying force, a safeguard against the encroachment of degenerating success.

CHAPTER XIII

RECALLING THE PAST

WALTER and Edith were just leaving for the Golf Club dinner as George and the others came out into the hall.

"We'll be back by two," Walter said. "Wait up for me if you aren't too tired. I've got heaps of important things to tell you."

"And I — questions to ask," Edith added.

"Then of course I'll wait for you," George answered. "Are the questions very serious?"

"They are — for him," Edith nodded towards Walter. "I want to know how he behaved on that long trip."

"Oh well, you need not be worried. I only saw him look at one girl twice."

"One girl! Well — that's just it! Now, if there had been three, I shouldn't mind, but one —"

"Come on, Edith, and stop talking to George Thorne. I told you that when a girl's engaged —" and out of the door they went laughing.

The drawing-room was brilliantly lighted. Several groups laughing and talking gaily broke up and came towards Mrs. Livingstone as she entered with George beside her. The introductions were gotten through easily, and in a few minutes George found himself talking with the people who had come on the train with him as if they had been friends always.

Being introduced by Mrs. Livingstone had evidently made him considered by these people as one of them. The conversation had drifted from the introductions into channels of every-day subjects, and he passed from group to group with the knowledge that he was holding a measure of their interest. Mrs. Livingstone had stood beside him for a while, one hand resting on his arm, the action more eloquent than any words she could have used ; and as he now and then caught the intent gaze of some one directed towards him he realised that enough was known of the situation to arouse curiosity.

"And you say they are going to adopt him," asked Mrs. Martin, who had retreated to a safe distance with her companion.

"So they say. Of course one gets nothing definite from the Livingstones themselves. So far it's all a mystery."

"But every one says he is their son."

"That is the surmise. However — there is nothing certain. I'm sure of that, for Walter Emery's father said that Mr. Livingstone had never mentioned it to him."

"What does Mrs. Braeme say?"

"Absolutely nothing. I actually had the temerity to ask her one day, and she said they had told her nothing about him."

"Of course, that isn't true."

"No — naturally, as she is with them all the time. But look at Mrs. Livingstone now. Did you ever see her look so well! And watch her with this young fellow — What's his name?"

"Thorne."

"Oh yes — Thorne. She doesn't take her eyes off of him. I'd give a good deal to know what it all means. He's rather attractive — don't you think so?"

"Yes — quite. Rather individual, too. One would never think he came from — where was it?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Out of a clear sky, I think."

"At least he has the hall mark of good associations."

George was talking to Miss Neilson.

"Why didn't you introduce yourself on the train?" she asked, a smile of greeting on her frank face. "We could have had a good two hours' chat."

"But how did I know you were coming here?"

"Yes — that's true. Somehow — I always think people ought to know things intuitively," she smiled vaguely.

"Yes — I admit they should ; but do they often?"

"I think so — in the big things of life. I'm rather old fashioned, or is it in advance? — in thinking that we are drawn by invisible ties to those who are going to take a part in our existence. But," she laughed gaily, "our conversation is rather personal, isn't it?"

George met her smile seriously.

"I find the subject interesting. I was thinking of it a few minutes ago."

"And what did you decide?"

"I haven't decided yet. It is still an open question."

"It sounds interesting. Will you tell me when

you find an answer? Don't forget now, for I intend to ask you each time we meet," she ended and turned to some one who had just joined them.

George stepped a little back from the circle so as to get a better view of those he had just met, and with whom he found himself so quickly *en rapport*. There was nothing new to him now in the sight of fashionably gowned women and cultivated men; for the past two years he had seen them every day, had been thrown with them constantly in hotels, in trains, and in the intimacy of travel on ships, even being invited to many of their houses through letters Mr. Livingstone had given him. Still, all that past experience had not been accompanied by the same measure of privilege with which he was surrounded this evening. He had accustomed himself to the attitude of observer rather than participant, so that it came to him with a start, that from henceforth the situation was to be different. He was now an integral part of those about him, with a position, an individuality and an opportunity, that he knew with a deep thrill of pleasure he was capable of making prominent.

Every now and then he became conscious that he was watching Mildred Braeme as she moved about the room, talking with one then another of the guests. There was a style and grace in her carriage, in all her movements, that made him feel instinctively she was much more dignified and aristocratic than most of those about her. With a natural discrimination, which travel had developed, he was able to place her beside women that Europe had found worthy of homage, and in the comparison she stood out clear

cut, fresh, natural, from a background of art and false standards. Watching her covertly and with an admiration that his honesty with himself made him admit, he felt his early resentment, almost fear of her, stir within him again. His face flushed with the memory of her cool insolence at their second meeting. Against it, his attempted insult, his reference to the question of inheritance, appeared to him cheap, and more than that, a false move. The angry flush died away into a hard smile when he realised that he was the only living man that possessed information that was important to her.

A slight touch on his arm made him turn quickly. Mrs. Livingstone was beside him.

"You are to take me in to dinner," she said, slipping her arm through his and indicating the door through which they were to go.

Together they walked across the hall through another room, reaching the long dining-room, glowing with the soft light of many candles, a little before the others.

"Sit here beside me," she said, placing her hand on the chair to her right and smiling at George. "After to-night they will all be gone and then —" she ended with her hand slipping down to his and holding it — "we shall begin to take up our life where it was broken off — twenty-two years ago."

George stood beside her as the others entered the room and found their places about the table. Mr. Livingstone was the last to enter with Miss Neilson, and before he took his seat, George saw a quick glance of happiness pass from him to his wife. Even after the steady flow of conversation had begun to ripple

about him George felt the exultation the exchange of glances had given him. He knew that he alone understood what it meant.

Opposite him, a little way down the table between two tall candelabra, Mrs. Braeme's profile stood out sharply as the light fell upon her face and shoulders. The concentration of the candles near her made her more prominent, in a manner, than those on either side; and through the soft murmur of the general conversation, George caught, every little while, the crisp sound of her voice. Her manner towards the two men on either side of her deepened his earlier impression of her — a polite indifference towards the world.

The dinner was served slowly and the conversation showed signs of lagging. Mrs. Livingstone, contrary to her usual custom, had not taken the lead and kept subjects before her guests in which all of them were interested. More than once she had leaned back in her chair and remained quiet a long time; even to George she had spoken little, seemingly contented and happy in the control of her thoughts.

When the ices were being served Miss Neilson met George's glance and held it a moment.

"Mr. Livingstone tells me you are just back from Europe," she said, "and all of us are so anxious to know what is new over there. Are there any important pictures, or operas, or more important still, are present styles *démodé*?"

"You are almost as difficult to answer as Mrs. Livingstone," George answered, laughing easily. "She asked me what had impressed me most out of the whole trip."

Down the length of the table the others waited for the answer.

"You would never guess — any of you," Mrs. Livingstone said, taking an interest once more in the conversation. "It surprised me completely. I wonder if you could guess, Mildred?"

Mrs. Braeme's eyes met George's.

"It would probably be the similarity to one's strongest characteristic that would create such an impression."

"What do you mean, Mildred?" Miss Neilson exclaimed. "You always insist on being so subtle."

"That is only your way of putting it, Kate," Mildred answered, smiling at the others. "I only mean that something that corresponds in some way to something we want to achieve, something that represents to us what we would like to do, appeals to us most, makes a more pronounced impression. Haven't you known men who would read nothing but the history of Napoleon — or some other character that they wished to resemble? In just such a way we are impressed by inanimate things."

"Then we must know what it was in your case, Mr. Thorne," Mrs. Martin said from her end of the table. "You see, according to Mrs. Braeme's theory, it would help us to place you at once."

George looked at Mrs. Livingstone and smiled.

"After such a discussion I don't think I can afford to tell — do you? It might be giving myself away too much." Then, as an after thought, he added, "But I shall leave it to your cleverness to decide and tell you just this; it was the last thing I saw."

Miss Neilson broke into a merry laugh.

"I know what that would be in my case, — the dock at Southampton or Liverpool, or wherever I sailed from; for I always go directly from it to my room and never see anything else until I reach New York."

George saw Mrs. Braeme's expression change to one of quick understanding as he finished the remark. He saw she knew what he meant, and in a smile that lurked at the corners of her mouth, he read what he interpreted to be a satisfaction at the discovery, also an amusement at his chagrin which she must have seen. The incident added to his certainty of her cleverness and with it came back the sullen hatred of her and her beauty. Suddenly his lips tightened.

"But I should be glad to tell you of the *man* who interested me most of all of those I met," he said, looking at Miss Neilson. "Perhaps that would not give me away quite so much," he ended smilingly.

"Well — I should say it was risky. You know birds of a feather. I'm sure we always admire people like ourselves more than any others."

"I don't agree with you at all. Opposites always attract — I mean opposite characters with similar tastes."

"We shall judge for ourselves." Miss Neilson leaned back and looked at George. "Begin."

George balanced the spoon on his coffee cup and hesitated. It was a big risk he was going to take, a chance for subduing one of his enemies but also full of the danger of arousing anger in those who were not his enemies. As he hesitated, he felt a strong desire to get out of the situation before he had taken a false step.

"It is a long story, and I am not a story teller," he said at last. "It would bore you, I'm sure."

A short silence met his remark; then Miss Neilson said, "We are willing to risk being bored." Mrs. Livingstone pressed his arm and said, "Tell it." Mildred Braeme across the table watched him with wide-opened, challenging eyes. George put down his spoon and rested his hand lightly on the table.

"The only point of interest in the story is the man's character," he began deliberately. "He was continually startling me with contradictions which I was never able to understand. Our first meeting sounds very much like a novel. If any of you are story tellers, I wish you would use it, for it would make a splendid situation. We were four days out from San Francisco and were going directly into a storm, when he and I met for the first time. The smoking-room was crowded, and what attracted my attention to him first was that he was standing beside one of the card tables and drinking a toast in a loud voice. The words of his toast were calculated to attract one's attention. They were: 'To no return.' When he had emptied his glass and thrown it crashing to the floor, he went out on deck where I found him later with the sea rushing over him. He had evidently reached a stage where life was valueless to him."

George paused and his glance swept the faces turned towards him. Mildred Braeme's pallor told him that she had understood from the beginning, and he noted, too, with a thrill, that the challenging expression had given place to one of pained interest.

"Splendid!" Miss Neilson exclaimed. "Chap-

ter one is excellent, but when does the leading lady appear?"

"She never does."

"No heroine? Fancy — a story without one! You will not be a success, Mr. Thorne, as a novelist."

"I mean she never appeared on the scene, but her influence is the whole story — she is there, subjectively, all the time. . . The man insisted on believing that I had saved his life simply because I had picked him up out on deck; and afterwards he could not do enough for me. However, we parted at Yokohama and met once or twice in India. Then, for almost a year, I lost sight of him. A year ago in Paris we ran into each other at the Musée Cluny and he brought up the boat episode again, insisting that he was indebted to me for his life. I was surprised at his appearance — hardly even recognising him at first, for it was evident that he was in the grip of some mortal disease. I went with him to his hotel and remained to dinner with him. He asked me when I was going back home, talking a good deal about New York in such a way that I saw his heart was still yearning to return. To a question of mine in that direction he said that he was determined to stay away until he died."

"Ah, I see," Miss Neilson cut in, "he had loved in vain. But do go on. It's growing interesting."

"When we parted that night he asked me if I would object to coming to see him often — that he had broken away from all his old associations and friends and that at times things got unbearably dreary. It was towards Easter last year, a week or two after I met him in Paris, that I saw he was be-

ginning to fail rapidly, and the delayed spring seemed to accentuate his malady. His physician kept insisting upon his going to the south of France, and one day, after I had promised to go with him to Nice and help him get comfortably located, he consented. After we arrived there it was only too plain that the poor fellow had only a week or two to live, and as he was entirely alone, having even discharged his valet, I made my arrangements to remain with him to the end. We got a pretty little villa and for several days the warmth and beauty of the place brightened him. But it was only temporary. He would insist on being driven over to Monte Carlo whenever he was able to sit up, and there he would spend the whole day at the Casino. It was the only thing that made him forget himself for a little while. It was there, in the Casino garden one day, that he told me his story."

George paused and looked around the table. The faces that met his were serious and interested; even Miss Neilson seemed contented to listen now without any more interruption. Mildred Braeme's eyes were glowing at him full of wonder and suspense. George felt the tremendous current of interest that was surging between them without one of the others being aware of it. So completely had the external situation vanished for him, as well as for her, that it was as if they were there alone, a desert island about them, a world uninhabited save by themselves.

"He told me that he had loved a girl very deeply and had married her. It had resulted in a great mistake. He had always been, hardly a drunkard I should say, but addicted to drink, and had hoped

that his love and marriage would help him to overcome it. He had counted foolishly though, for he confessed that the vice had gotten such a hold on him that he had been unable to throw it off. When this realisation was forced upon him he had lost all hope, feeling the depth of his own misery and knowing too well that he had ruined the happiness of the girl he loved. Little by little it came out that it was not all his own fault. He was a warm-hearted man, affectionate and charming but with a constant changefulness, a lack of stability and strength that must have been the effect of some early lack of the necessity of facing situations which would have strengthened him. Evidently the woman he had married was intellectual and intolerant of any weakness — the weakness that makes for one's strongest hold upon us. From the beginning the marriage had sunk under a spiritual chill, and his love, starving for the softness and delicate flattery and patience that his nature craved, had been thrust back upon itself and taken refuge in an oblivion easily found. It is a thoroughly modern case, I suppose you will say, and yet, somehow, to me, I can't blame him very much. I feel that his love redeemed him, for even after they had separated and he had made Europe his home, he could not resist the temptation to go back each year to see her; not to meet her, you understand, not even to let her know that he had returned — but just to look at her from a distance. He said it was the only bright spot out of a whole year, and even that was full of suffering, for it seems that each time he saw her again he imagined he could discern the effects of the suffering he had caused."

George lowered his eyes and looked at his hands a moment; when he began again his tone was almost intimate, so completely did he feel that he was talking to only one of his listeners.

"He never blamed her, there was never one word of criticism, and only through what was left unsaid, or what he said in self-accusation, was I able to see the situation clearly and understand the tremendous mistake of it all. Without knowing it he put it very clearly before me. It was easy enough to see how a woman could love him and how, at the same time, possessing intellectual authenticity and being perhaps intolerant, she had ruined his happiness and her own. He was a handsome man, beautifully educated, a gentleman in every thought, and what came to me as a great surprise later, an unusual lover of the beautiful. In the evenings at Nice we would sit together on the little terrace in front of the villa, and he would tell me long stories of his adventures in almost every place in the world. He was familiar with art, knew every picture worth knowing, and was passionately fond of literature, — yet beneath it all was his weakness, his lack of stability and strength. It seemed that he feared to face the serious situations of life; that spoiled all that was good in him, and the woman who might have saved him never realised her mission. . . He died the second week after we had gone to Nice. Even at the last he would not tell me where to write to his wife or his friends. It was a peculiar idea of his that he would be doing them a kindness in not letting them know. I tried to persuade him differently, but he held out to the end. . . His last wish was to be buried

at Nice with no name to mark his grave ; and I was forced to carry out his wish, not knowing what else to do. He burned all of his letters, and the last day he asked me to bring a candle to his bedside, and while I went to the window he burned a photograph which he had never shown me. When it was a heap of ashes, he looked at me and smiled sadly, saying : ' That was my wife — she never understood ! ' "

George drew his hands from the table and leaned back in his chair. A palpable silence followed the story. Several glances had been directed towards Mildred Braeme as the tale developed into incidents similar to her life, but she had remained unconscious of them, listening intently. Her eyes had not left George's face once, and when he had finished and met her glance, she involuntarily drew herself up and back from the table, seeing once more in his eyes the cold glitter of snow mountains — merciless and granite-like.

" Is that all ? " Miss Neilson was the first to break the silence. " Do you mean to say that you never found out anything about him — who he was — what his name was ? "

" I knew his name all the time. "

" Oh ! what was it ? Perhaps some of us have heard of him. "

George remained silent a full minute. The whole room was hushed to hear what was coming ; and while he waited he saw Mildred Braeme lean on the table, her eyes strained towards him, her lips barely moving, her whole expression speaking to him as plainly as if the words had been uttered. He heard them coming to him across the silence of two years,

as full of pleading as they had been that night when she had begged him to stop before he had gone too far. "If there is a spark of manhood in you —." Ah! his chance had come to spare her.

"I hardly think it would be acting quite honestly with him to tell," he met her intent look as he answered. "If I ever meet the woman, I may tell her — that is if she showed in any way that she would be interested in hearing about it."

Mildred leaned back in her chair, the intense expression gone, and in her eyes, growing unnaturally large in the pallor of her face, had crept a peculiar expression that thrilled George. He knew now that he had the whip in his hand.

CHAPTER XIV

AN OFFER OF FRIENDSHIP

THREE hours later George was sitting alone in the smoking-room. It was a room formed by one end of a long verandah enclosed in glass and decorated with Navajo blankets and Indian baskets scattered about carelessly, seemingly without regard to effect or any special arrangement. Some plants in odd-shaped, crudely decorated pottery, unique though comfortable bamboo furniture, and a fireplace built of rough stones made the place cheerful and home-like, thoroughly in accord with the effect of the rest of the house — an effect of luxurious simplicity. A wide door at the far end of the room opened into a conservatory which appeared huge in its dimly lighted extent.

George had not found Mildred Braeme in the drawing-room after dinner. He had glanced around the room in search of her, feeling a keen interest in observing the effect upon her of what he had told, and in her absence he knew conclusively that the story had hit home. How long her pride would keep her from coming to him aroused in him a change of pleasurable conjecture. That she would come he never once doubted, and with this certainty he felt like a man standing on the very pinnacle of success and drinking deeply of its wine.

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Livingstone had suspected

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any motive behind the story; that had been shown plainly in their treatment of it after dinner, voiced by a few light comments upon its interest and the part he had played in it. Standing with Mrs. Livingstone at the foot of the staircase, after the guests had dispersed, George had held her hand to his lips with the old-world courtesy he managed so successfully, and bade her good-night.

"If you are an early riser," she had said, "be sure to go out to the terrace overlooking the valley. It is beautiful in the early morning. It is a view which makes one's hopes take life before one. As for breakfast — I am always alone. My guests never consider it their duty to appear before luncheon, and Winston doesn't rise early, either. If you are up you will find me in the breakfast-room about nine."

"It is a lifelong habit with me — to rise early."

"And if you would like to ride just tell Bankston and he will arrange it for you. You may meet Mildred, she goes frequently before breakfast; Walter and Edith too. But do just as you wish. Feel as if everything is yours — that it is your home — for that is what it is now. I am so proud of you. I never thought I was going to be as happy again. Good-night."

George had stood a long time by the staircase after she had gone and the rustling of her skirts had died away, his head lowered, one hand upon the rail where hers had rested. Mr. Livingstone had found him there a few minutes later.

"You are going to wait up for Walter's return?"

"Yes — we want to talk over what has happened since we parted."

" Well, I think you will have the house to yourself. You know the way around now, I think. Tomorrow we shall have a long talk." He brushed his hand across his forehead, and George noticed that the ravages of age were beginning to show distinctly. After the effort of the evening he appeared utterly weary and exhausted. " The responsibility of guests is rather fatiguing. You will find plenty of cigars in the smoking-room. Be sure to make yourself comfortable."

George found his way to the smoking-room, and in the gradual settling into the quiet of night, the house grew deathly still. He picked a brier-root pipe from the collection on the table, and while filling it slowly, tore a piece of paper from a magazine and held it to the blaze of the fire — a habit of his youth which made him overlook the cigar lighter on the table.

He walked the length of the room many times, thoughtfully pulling at the pipe. After a while the warm flow of the smoke seemed to bring to him a lessening of the excitation which had held him in its grip all through the evening, and he pushed a chair closer to the hearth and threw himself in it, letting a long sigh escape him.

It was all such a game, he mused wearily; and in the exhaustion that followed the intense play of his passions, he viewed himself as a man who no longer had self-mastery. His brain seemed burning still with unquenchable flames. He had felt too sensitively throughout the evening, he said to himself; he had taken nothing calmly; everything had affected him like a thin wire subjected to some electrical force.

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Such a condition would not lead to success ; indeed, it meant failure through the rapid wearing out of his strength. Scenes and words kept repeating themselves and mingling indistinctly as if he were experiencing some weird dream — an old characteristic of his childhood suddenly come back upon him. It had always been difficult for him to sleep at night, even as a child ; many hours passing before he could drive his wild imagination to rest, or quiet the constant energy of his brain. The past year, when he had begun to feel the influence of Mrs. Livingstone's letters, and the fear of himself had grown into a constant companion, he had learned the sedative powers of liquor, and at times he felt that it was the only thing that had helped him through particularly bad periods.

With a return of this thought he rose from the chair and looked about the room for a bell with which to summon a servant.

A man responded at once, and as quickly returned with a tray of bottles and a bowl of crushed ice.

"What time is it?" George asked as the tray was placed on the table.

"One o'clock, sir."

"I suppose you're off duty, so you need not wait up on my account. I shall be here till Mr. Emery returns."

He picked up a decanter with a sigh of relief, and mixing the whiskey with sparkling water, he held the tall glass before him so that the firelight glistened through the amber colour. He smiled contentedly.

"You are a fool, George Thorne," he mused, as he held the glass to his lips. "You are a bigger fool

than I ever expected you to be. Think of the risks you ran this evening. Think of the precipice you stood on in almost telling her everything. Have you lost your senses? Don't you know she is the strongest force in your favour — perhaps the only one you have? — and yet — you dared to attempt to tell her. And why? — simply because she has shown you her trust in you, given you of her affection. Are you a weakling that a woman's tenderness should turn you into a coward and a fool? Think of what she would have done if you had told her. Cast you out of the house this very night, possibly have you prosecuted for an impostor. Her hatred of you would have been greater than the other woman's is now. If you are not man enough to combat her influence, keep away from her. Don't talk to her when you are alone with her if you are a silly weakling. Let her love you, let her think you are her child. It is happiness to her — it is everything to you!"

He rose suddenly and walked the length of the room. The intensity of his thoughts had brought a cold perspiration to his brow; there was an unsteady movement in his walk, and as he reached the end of the room, he stopped before a half-open window and pushed the sash out so that he stood in the wide opening with the cold night wind rushing over him. He wiped his handkerchief across his moist forehead and took a long breath of the refreshing atmosphere.

The night was ominously dark. A pale moon was shedding a weird light through banks of heavy clouds. Far below, down the sloping hillsides,

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which were now black, glistened a few lights from the sleeping village.

"There is no necessity for anything but perfect truth between us."

The words, her words, came to him out of the darkness. Every breath of the cold air seemed to vibrate with the sound of her voice. Was he never to be able to rid himself of it? Was his life, the whole remaining part of his existence, to be robbed of the joy of success by the insistence of this fear? He must escape from it in some way — he must get away from her — their lives must be separated, or the success of his scheme would be shattered beyond repair.

"Tell her the truth. Tell her the truth."

The glittering lights of the village cried the words out to him. He saw them written on the gloomy massing of hills, in the deep shadows of the valley; they reached to him from out of the racing banks of clouds; they were back of him waiting to face him when he turned around; they were everywhere. They were forcing their way closer and closer, crushing him, entering his brain like a thousand steel blades.

He loosened his collar with the choking sensation that had come into his throat. His head grew light, and he grasped the frame of the window to steady himself as the dizziness swept over him.

Hours must have passed, he thought, as he stood there, and, with the passing of time, there came to him a feeling of utter helplessness. Gradually it came to him very clearly; he saw distinctly now that it was the standards which had been instilled into

him at the impressionable age of his boyhood, the influence of that memorable year reasserting itself. Whether he could resist it or not was a problem now before him, and the doubt, the questions, the struggle that was raging within him, left him with a sense of not being able to control the situation any longer. Some power greater than human seemed to have taken supreme control.

Suddenly he trembled with the feeling that some one was in the room with him. Perhaps she had come back to torture him again. He clenched his hands firmly and turned about. With a start of relief he saw Mildred Braeme standing in the center of the room and looking directly towards him. As he went up to her, unaware that his collar was open and that his face showed the unmistakable signs of inner conflict, her expression changed to one of shocked surprise — almost fear. Unconsciously she made a movement of drawing away as he approached.

"I thought I was alone," George said, stopping as he saw her quick movement of retreat. "Please sit down, Mrs. Braeme. Did you wish to speak to me?"

He noticed the unnatural brilliance of her eyes, the large pupils glistening in her pale, drawn face, the long trailing folds of her gown covered by a voluminous shawl of heavy embroidery, the less formal arrangement of her hair; — each of the details of her appearance struck him with a new effect. She was more womanly, gentler, weaker — infinitely more feminine.

"Yes — I came here to talk to you. I saw you at the window from my room."

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Her voice was low, yet beneath its slight tremor George detected the coldness that her appearance belied. He drew a chair closer to the hearth for her and stood a little way from her as she sank into it, letting the lacy folds of her gown fall carelessly about her. With the movement came an indefinable faint perfume with its subtle suggestion of intimacy.

George folded his arms and leaned against the table in an attitude of waiting; while she, leaning a little forward with her hands clasped in her lap, studied his face thoughtfully.

A minute passed without a word, each returning the other's searching look. Finally Mildred broke the silence.

"You know why I came to you," she said, unclasping her hands and leaning back.

"Well?" George answered, without moving.

"I am considering if there is any use in asking you — if you would tell me the truth if I did."

George's lips moved slightly, as if he were going to smile, then his face resumed its expressionless waiting.

"Would you?" she asked.

"If you cannot trust the answer, why do you ask?"

She started restlessly.

"But I must know," she cried impatiently. "It means so much to me. You see the horrible position it puts me in; the uncertainty is unbearable."

George indifferently picked up a pipe that lay on the table.

"You see, Mrs. Braeme," he said slowly, without looking at her, "I am supposed to know nothing whatever about you. We have met only twice.

How should I know that the story affected you in any way?"

A look of hope, then doubt, flashed across her face.

"Then why did you tell that story at dinner? — why did you refuse to tell the man's name?"

George smiled broadly.

"I was only telling the most interesting part of my trip. As for his name, why should I tell that, when he wanted it kept a secret? Would you have told it?"

"But it is not right to leave his wife in ignorance of his death. Think of the uncertainty that would always remain with her. Think of the — " she hesitated barely a second — "the relief the certainty would give her."

George shifted his position and pulled a cigarette case from his pocket. "Yes — but I'm not certain that she deserved the relief, as you call it. As you see, he talked to me very plainly — and I feel as if I knew his life intimately — and also that of his wife. You don't object to smoking?" He lighted a cigarette after she had given her consent. "By the way, he gave me this cigarette case," he continued, handing it to her. "It's a rather interesting piece of work, isn't it? He said he had picked it up in Toledo on his wedding trip. I think he called it Eber work."

She put out her hand and grasped the case quickly, holding it unsteadily before her. Her face had grown almost grey in its pallor.

"You say that he talked to you plainly — that he told you everything," her voice was husky and indistinct. "I suppose you feel then that you can

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hold this information over the woman if opportunity demands it," she continued, her voice growing firm again.

George inhaled the cigarette smoke slowly.

"Yes, I shall use it," he spoke deliberately and without expression, "if I find it necessary."

"That will be brave and noble in you."

"It remains with her to develop those characteristics in me."

"You mean you could be bought?"

George wrinkled his brow, and then laughed outright.

"Really, Mrs. Braeme, you are immensely clever. I had not thought of that — but it's not a bad idea. How much do you suppose she would consider the secret worth?"

The amused look was still in his eyes as he put the question, though he asked it seriously enough.

She did not answer at once. Indecision was expressed plainly in her attitude, in the quick glance she threw at him, and in the flush of crimson that flooded her face when she saw that he was laughing at her. Suddenly she rose and faced him.

"What he told you is nothing to me. You are welcome to it. It is only the story of two miserable people. What I want to know — what I came to you for — is to be sure that it was my husband."

George faced her squarely.

"Yes — it was Hampton Braeme."

"And he is dead?"

"Yes, he died last April — a year ago."

"You are telling me the truth?"

"Yes."

She swayed unsteadily, and he put out his hand, taking hold of her arm to support her.

"It is nothing," she said weakly, sinking into the chair. "Give me that glass of water, please. I shall be all right in a moment. You see — I was not certain before."

George handed her the glass, then turned away and walked across the room to the open window. He stood there, with his back to her, listening intently for any movement she should make.

"And he has been dead for more than a year," he heard her say as if to herself.

"Yes — a year last month," George answered, quietly crossing the room again.

"And you were with him when he died?" she said, a new interest in her eyes as she looked at him.

"Yes — I was with him two weeks before he died. It was somewhat of a surprise to me to find that I was willing to lose all that time, but you see he had shown an interest in me, he had been kind to me, and it may surprise you very much — it does me at times — but kindness touches me very deeply. Somehow, I feel as if I must repay it in some way. Probably that is because I have had so little of it that it impresses me; but — he really wanted me to be with him, and that flattered me greatly. I was aware too of the advantage his association was to me in many ways. I was hopelessly crude when I left here, and I needed just such an associate as he to learn from. There were so many little details of which I was ignorant and which I could pick up from him; he could show me the side which only the initiated know. By watching him I could see how a

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wealthy man, a man used to the best society, de-ported himself ; by imitating him I felt that I might soon become what it had taken several generations to make of him. Oh, I did not let anything escape me. I studied carefully, I watched keenly for every shading and distinction, and I remember he said to me once, ' You have the subjective temperament which makes everything come easy to you. You adjust yourself so quickly, so easily, that it all seems perfectly natural.' He hadn't an idea that it was all accomplished through actual labour."

George had sunk into the chair opposite her as the flow of words rushed from him ; and as he talked on, meeting her eyes steadily when they were lifted to his, he felt subtly that the woman before him was lessening in her resistance, that he had broken through the thick wall of her aloofness and taken hold of her interest, even against her will. That she was struggling still he saw plainly in her mastery of silence ; this only drove him on more forcefully, his whole being tingling with a voice within him which told him his virility, his magnetism, his power, was not spending itself uselessly.

" Probably you will say I made use of this acquaintance for my own benefit — and I did. I confess it."

" Ah — you admit that. I knew it from the first — when Walter told me."

" What did Walter tell you?"

" The boat incident. It was so — so palpably lucid to me."

George smiled, then his mouth settled into firmness.

“ Well, why should I not use every opportunity that comes my way? Still — believe me or not as you please — there was something beyond that in our relationship. I felt a sympathy for the man. He was alone and miserable, and I knew what both those things meant. Only it was even harder on him, for he had happiness to look back upon and compare the present with; with me, I had never known anything but a continual lonely struggle.”

He stopped, brushing his hand across his forehead and letting it rest in the disorder of his hair. The unassumed, perfectly natural interest of the woman before him sent his thoughts racing off into different realms from his subject. He found himself wondering if it were grief that had so suddenly softened her, or if it were the great relief that certainty had brought her. The sight of her, so near to him, so suddenly free from her former hauteur, so alluring in her resplendent sex, warmed his blood like wine. More completely than any other expression of wealth, she symbolised what he craved; her fastidious aloofness and refinement, in which every detail appeared to him to have the finish of a jewel, formed for him a sort of new goal — a new height of attainment.

He caught his breath quickly with this fresh impetus, threw away the cigarette, and stood up.

“ Why did you not come to me first with this story?” Mildred broke the short silence. “ Was it not my right to hear it before the others?”

George rested one arm on the mantel-shelf and looked down at her.

“ Can you consistently ask me that after your

treatment of me from the very first? You forget, you probably would not have listened to the first word."

"I think you are mistaken. Of course I should have listened."

"Besides — I had another use for the story."

"Ah! — I see — You wanted to make me suffer before all those people."

"Yes. I wanted to hurt you as you had hurt me, if I could."

"Then to complete it — why did you not tell his name at the table?"

"First — because you plead with me — ah, — silently — I admit, but plain enough; and then — because I wanted to make you come to me."

"Then your success has been complete?"

"So far — yes."

He waited for another question; instead, she lowered her eyes and looked straight before her into the fire. The regular movement of her slippered foot on the floor was her only sign of excitement. George stared down at her in silence. The clock in the hall chimed the half hour.

"I am going to speak to you very plainly, Mrs. Braeme," he said hurriedly, as if having just reached a decision.

She looked up at him quickly.

"It seems to me you have been doing that all along."

"Now, though, it is about yourself."

For a moment the old hauteur was in her manner; her shoulders were raised slightly.

"You say you know a great deal about me. Why should I object?"

George drew a chair a little nearer to her and sat down. As he began talking, he grasped his knee with both hands and leaned forward, so that he was looking intently at her.

"From the very first you have been against me. Because you did not find out anything definite to corroborate the statements I have made to Mr. Livingstone, and from some impression you got of me, you were determined to bar my progress in every way. You said that I was an impostor — that I was playing upon their sympathy to gain my point. You knew all along that I had not insisted upon anything, except that they should trace the matter and help me find out if there was anything in it. Why did you doubt me so quickly? Will you tell me?"

George waited, watching her through narrowed eyes. At first she did not answer, still gazing at the fire of smouldering logs; then, unexpectedly to George, she flashed a look at him full of significance.

"That is unimportant. It did you no harm."

"I think it did a great deal."

"How? Haven't you won?"

"In some ways, yes; not all."

His voice lowered and his eyes looked away with that gentle expression of the dreamer in them that invariably came when he recalled some forgotten scene or created one out of his fancies. He was in this attitude when Mildred looked at him, and it was with a quickening expression that she continued to regard him as he talked on, seemingly oblivious to her presence.

"The night I first saw you a new world had just

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been opened to me. I stood in a room that represented to me a sort of Paradise. I was going to pass the evening with two people I had begun to think of as my parents, who were thinking of me as their child; I had just passed an hour with a woman whose tenderness and sympathy, and even love, had called to life in me feelings that I had never before been aware of. I was crazed with joy. And then," his voice grew a shade softer, "I came into the room and saw you. It seemed to me that you were the most beautiful creature I had ever imagined. Ah, I remember that first impression perfectly — I shall never forget it — the cool, sparkling silver on your white gown, and a garland of leaves twisted in your hair. You made me think of some goddess from the grove of Daphne, you were so brilliant and wonderful, and I thrilled with the knowledge that my new life was opening to me the association of such a woman as you. Then, suddenly, all my dreams changed when you spoke. Your very words of greeting chilled me, and afterwards, when you came to me in the library and confronted me — your beauty went out like a flash." The gentleness of his eyes shifted into a cold, hard glitter. "I knew you then as my enemy, and my first feeling of worship changed into a determined hatred. Every scheme and thought was tinged with it. I swore that not one thing would escape me that I might use against you. I wanted to crush you — get you out of my way. Don't you remember how startled you were when I looked at you that night? I could have killed you easily."

His eyes held her in a fascinated gaze, their in-

tensity full of a supreme control that seemed to rob her of the power of turning from him.

"I don't believe you realised what you were doing. You did not understand that you were — " he hesitated, then continued, more thoughtfully, — "that you were trying to keep from me all that I craved so, all that would make my life happy and higher and full of accomplishment. You did not understand, because you did not know. How could you? You are a composite type of the class of people with whom you live. You have built around yourself a high wall of selfishness and aloofness from the real world. You don't want to see the other side — you are afraid it would bring you unpleasant sensations; you couldn't help but feel the suffering you would see, and for that reason you prefer to remain in ignorance. In not knowing it you feel that you have no responsibility."

He rose from the chair and moved restlessly to the hearth.

"I see your situation clearly now that I have spent two years among your friends, and know the luxuries that forced these conditions upon you; and — I know the other side. From your outlook you are unable to form an opinion of what poverty is. Probably all you have ever seen of it was a beggar on the street, to whom, passing quickly, you have thrown a penny, and rushed on to be rid of the unpleasant sight."

George folded his arms and leaned against the mantel, his eyes narrowing with a set expression which the thoughts gave him.

"I have known all this poverty, felt it to the dregs,

as far back as I can remember. To you, I suppose, it all seems like a play from which you have gone away momentarily saddened, comforted afterwards with the thought that it was only acting. But to me it has been my existence — a sort of rubbish heap of life — the thing that met me when I opened my eyes in the morning. Great God! How I hate it! How I hate everything that tied me down to it! How I hate you for trying to push me back into it!"

He took a step towards her, his figure towering over her, his eyes blazing down into hers with the vehemence of his passion. Suddenly he stopped with the realisation that his laboured breathing was sounding loud in the intense stillness of the room; then he broke into an abrupt laugh and turned away.

"Of course I am a fool for talking to you in this way. Somehow, though," he went on calmly, sinking into a chair, "I think I wanted to make you realise clearly my position; and I believe," very slowly, "that I wanted you to know why I acted as I did to-night in telling that story. Perhaps I am a little ashamed now of having done it. Men should not make women suffer — but you, in my hatred of you, brought out the worst in me."

He leaned back in his chair and waited for her to speak, wondering what effect, if any, all that he had said would have upon her. While he had been talking, and more than all, when he had suddenly stopped and stood close to her, holding her eyes against her will, he knew that he had mastered her pride. But now, in her motionless pose, in the seeming unconsciousness of his presence, he found himself wonder-

ing if it had only been the effect of his force which would die out as soon as she had thrown it off. He lighted a cigarette as he waited, and watched the small circles of smoke drift about the room. The subdued ticking of a clock made a sharp, distinct sound; the fire had burned low, sending out spasmodically a blue flame from the charred embers; the quiet grew more and more penetrating.

Finally Mildred shifted her position, then stood up, and without looking at him, moved away towards the window. The breeze, with a thread of warmth in its chill — a promise of spring — moved the hair gently back from her forehead and wafted to George a faint perfume. He watched her intently, feeling subtly the effect of her beauty as she stood in the open window, the sensuousness of the awakening season, the balm of the quiet night, the pale moonlight — all clothing her symbolically. Suddenly he felt the intimacy of the situation, the strong feminine magnetism of the woman, rush over him with a dizzying force. He got up and went swiftly to the window and stood beside her.

“You have made it very clear to me,” she began slowly, looking out into the night, — “all that you have just said. I did not consider you when I determined to do all that I could to keep my relatives from being deceived. It was only of them that I thought, and I felt that they needed my help. I saw your chance to win. I felt, too, your assurance, your strength. Perhaps I have been wrong — to-night I have begun to think so. Do you know—” and she turned towards George, scarcely a foot between the level of their eyes, — “do you know,

I believe you have bullied me into believing in you."

The ends of her wrap blew against George as he stood beside her, and in the long glance that passed between them he saw a smile flicker on her lips.

"Do you want me to be your friend now — or is it too late?"

His fingers tightened on the soft folds of her shawl; then, utterly beyond control, the blood rushed through him like fire, and he drew her against him violently, covering her face, her hair, her neck with the hot breath of his kisses. Struggling against him, she tried vainly to draw herself away, at last trembling so in her weakness that she held to him for support. It was then that his fingers tightened on her arms, and he held her a little way from him so that he could look into her face and read there a new expression that was showing through her fear of him.

"No — I don't want you for a friend," he cried, his voice choking with his passion, "I want you for my enemy so I can go on hating you all my life — in just this way!"

CHAPTER XV

UNDER DISCUSSION

THE sunlight, glowing through muslin curtains, awakened George the next morning and made him sit up with a start. Then, as the memory of where he was and what had taken place the night before flashed over him, he jumped out of bed and looked at his watch, feeling that he had slept late into the morning and missed his breakfast engagement. The watch dispelled his alarm; it was only seven o'clock.

A cold bath braced him after the chaotic dreams that had been with him throughout the few hours of sleep, so that he went downstairs with a return of his old feeling of assurance.

The house seemed very still and deserted. Some servants were stirring about at their early morning tasks, making hardly any noise with their quick, quiet movements. The doors of the hall were wide open, the morning sun gushing in and bringing out in strange relief the intricate designs of the oriental carpets.

George walked out on the broad verandah and looked about him. The balustrade about the terrace, punctuated here and there with bay trees, the driveway leading off through symmetrically grouped foliage to the less formal park beyond, recalled to him many places through which he had wandered during the past year. He crossed the terrace and

went down the broad steps, strolling without any direct motive till a narrow path had led him to a pergola on the brow of the hill. Here he sat down and drew a long breath of the balmy air. It must be the view Mrs. Livingstone had spoken to him about, he mused. All that had been suggested the night before from the window of the smoking-room stood out sharp and clear cut in the fresh purity of the early morning light. The fragrance of the awakening season flavoured the atmosphere deliciously. About him the groomed garden glowed in warm tints, directly before him the landscape showed the effect of being deftly aided in producing an impression of unstudied elegance, and farther away, where the lights had gleamed the night before, was a village made picturesque by distance and beyond which gentle hills blended into mountains of vague blue.

Looking at the scene meditatively, George found himself recalling Mrs. Livingstone's words when she had told him that the view, in its breadth and unrestricted distances, gave her hopes full play — a highly sensitised film, he knew now, upon which she could project the future in which he had played the principal part. The thought brought to him a feeling of intimate relation to the picture, a sensation that, in some way, he was a part of it; that it was shot through with his personality. Then came a great desire to lose himself in the emotion of believing that all this ideal world in which he had thrust himself was by right, by inheritance, by the laws of nature, his own. He attempted to forget the still uncertain outcome of the whole situation and think of

himself as having been placed always in just such surroundings. The idea brought an articulate happiness to him, this pretense of believing that he had been born to the position, that such surroundings had been the mellowing influences of his youth, that this home had been the home of his boyhood where all his ambitions had sprung into existence. Through such persuasion he found himself questioning the sensation and the effect of viewing the world from such a vantage point of safety, and with the realisation that no struggle for livelihood could be possible in such a position, that even individual effort would be a rather forced interest without the motive of necessity, it came over him that the adventure into which he had thrown himself had all the elements of chance and uncertainty beside which the other seemed flat. The thrill of conjuring up his future, the fascinating problem of his own development, got hold of him again, and once more, as in the past two years, he felt the strange influence of Mrs. Livingstone pushing him towards some goal that was not in his calculations. The note of the night before struck him again with full force, — her suggestion of an instinct that drew them together, the hidden, incomprehensible tie of nature that spoke through the soul. The thought stirred him deeply. What was there in that suggestion? Reason it out as he would, he was forced to admit that he had taken his place in this new life with wonderful ease. Must not that have been the effect of some unknown inheritance? He had adapted himself as if he had known it all in some former existence. He, a man out of the rubbish heap of poverty, had slipped into the midst of people

who had been leading such lives for generations, and in a year had become one of them. It did not seem possible, — there was something back of it that he could not grasp,—there must be something stronger than a mere tendency. Could his ancestors have lived this life? Had his father and mother known it before they had gone West and gotten lost in the upheaval of a new country? His father and mother! He had never thought of them before in this relation to himself; indeed, they represented nothing to him, having died before he could remember. Even his aunt had seldom spoken of them to him, and then, it had been a mere mentioning of their names. But now, with the awakening knowledge of what parents meant, above all, what this strange force of a mother's love was, he began to wonder what his mother had been like, if he had resembled her, and what traits of hers he had inherited; and if he should have been drawn to her in this inexplicable way. The reverie brought a gentle warmth to him, an odd feeling of tenderness that left him physically relaxed.

Suddenly the scene between him and the woman who was claiming him as her child rushed before him, bringing with it the burning shame of the night before. He stood up quickly under the renewed force of his self fear and walked hurriedly towards the house. Each hour seemed to press down upon him the certainty that his salvation lay in occupation, in some absorbing work that would keep closed the doors of self-questioning. He threw back his head as if shaking himself free of them. If the game would only be difficult enough he could hold on to the end.

As he stepped across the road the sharp sound of hoof beats caught his attention and he turned quickly, stepping aside as he saw a horse cantering towards him. Mildred Braeme was in the saddle, and as she neared him, he got a quick flashing impression of her, different from what he had received before. Her *svelte* figure, perfectly tailored, the glow in her cheeks and the exhilaration of the exercise resplendent in her eyes, made her appear less artificial than under the glow of lights as he had always seen her. In the severe riding costume and in the full glare of brilliant sunshine, she seemed more in touch with the life about her than he had imagined possible. The memory of their interview brought a flux of exultation coursing through his veins, and he waited by the side of the road for her to pass him, keenly alive to the suspense of seeing how she would meet him.

She looked at him frankly, inclining her head slightly and not once drawing rein as the horse cantered by. George went on towards the house, his lips a little firmer than before.

Bankston met him in the hall and told him that Mrs. Livingstone was waiting for him in the breakfast-room. George followed him through the rooms to the side of the house which opened on the terrace and entered a small room, all white enameled wood and flower-trellised wall paper. A bright fire was crackling in the grate, dispelling the morning chill, and the cheerful sound, blending with the streaming sunlight, gave the little room an essentially cosy appearance. Mrs. Livingstone was already seated at the table, a silver urn before her, a pot of hya-

cinths in the center of the table adding a deliciously spring-like fragrance to the room.

"So you really kept your promise," she said, her smile radiant as she looked at George. "I didn't half expect you. I am sure you made a great effort to get up in time."

George sat down beside her at the small table, protesting her remark.

"I've been up for hours," he said. "I had really grown impatient and — hungry."

"A man's appetite!" Mrs. Livingstone smiled. "It will make him prompt when everything else fails. I ordered a big breakfast this morning, so please don't say you only take coffee."

"Indeed I don't. I'm too thoroughly American for that. In fact, I invariably wake up hungry. The only thing that consoles me for being so terribly old-fashioned is that doctors say it means good health."

"And a clear conscience," Mrs. Livingstone added.

George looked at her quickly, thinking how unwittingly her remarks hit home.

"I never got used to a Continental breakfast," he went on hurriedly.

Mrs. Livingstone poured out a cup of coffee.

"And what have you been doing while you were waiting for me, as you put it?"

"I went out to find the view you told me about. It is magnificent."

"Ah — I am glad you like it." She leaned back in her chair and looked at him tenderly. "To me, it has always been full of you. That is why I chose it. Did you feel that when you were looking at it?"

George met her glance seriously. How strange that her question had voiced the thought that had come to him.

"I chose the site for this house on account of the view — ah, a long, long time ago — when you had been away from me for two years and they had told me there was no use hoping any longer. Think of giving up hope! It is that which has brought you back to me. But the view, in some way, cheered me, and told me to go on living and waiting."

"Do you believe that hereditary influences count for much in our lives?" George suddenly asked her, after a short pause.

"Yes — they must." She looked at him in surprise. "If we inherit physical likeness, why not mental characteristics? But why do you ask?"

"The view this morning brought the idea more vividly before me than ever before. Somehow it made me think of my mother."

"Your mother. I — I don't understand." Her voice trembled with the anxiety which had come into her eyes.

"I mean," George hurried on with the mastery of the thought, "I mean that the idea came to me that if I were not your child —"

Her hand laid on his quickly stopped him. In the quick stirring of her influence he felt himself relentlessly pushed on once more towards the precipice. The thought had sprung into his brain and spoken against his will that now seemed powerless to hold anything back.

"I do not doubt it any longer — why should you?"

"If I could believe it," George went on, his voice trembling slightly, "I don't think I could stand the — the happiness."

"Then let us believe it. We can — if we will. It all remains with us. Let us put all uncertainty out of our minds. Sometimes — thinking a thing makes it true."

George shifted his eyes from hers and glanced through the windows.

"You think then," he began thoughtfully, "that we can be happy — that we can go on as we have begun?"

"No — not as we have begun, for we must grow closer and closer together each day. Think of the time we have lost that we must make up for. Will you be contented to be with me now — always?"

"Yes — yes, it is the only way I can ever be happy — if that is to be my portion. But if something should happen, if we found out some day that I was not your child, that you were not my mother — would that make much difference to you?"

She drew back from her position of leaning towards him and he saw a quick flash of pain dull her eyes, even for a second robbing her face of its delicate colouring.

"Don't speak of that to me. It frightens me. It makes me feel as if everything were slipping away from me. I couldn't stand it — it would kill me now."

George's hands clenched together beneath the table; then, coming with the suffusion of a great light, the determination took life in him to use her words as the controlling motive of his future. For

her sake, now, he could quell the stirrings of conscience which he had felt were drawing him headlong into an abyss. He lifted his eyes to hers and smiled. He had found something even stronger than his old idea of honour.

"We will do it then," he said, his voice vibrating happily. "By believing it, we will make it true."

A servant entering the room broke upon the privacy of their conversation.

"I sent word to Mildred to join me at breakfast this morning," Mrs. Livingstone resumed a little later. "She was riding, Bankston told me, but will be back soon. Did you see her while you were out?"

Before George answered the door opened and Mildred entered the room. Seeing him, she stopped and looked questioningly at Mrs. Livingstone.

"Bankston gave me your message," she said quickly. "I thought you were alone, though." Her glance shifted to George who had risen.

"You know that makes no difference, Mildred." Mrs. Livingstone pulled her down towards her, kissing her on the forehead. "I wanted you to breakfast with me." She turned to George and continued, "You see, Mildred has been both son and daughter to me for so long that I feel she belongs to me. But now I have you both — a real son and a real daughter. And there is but one desire left me —" Mildred dropped her riding crop, and as George stooped to pick it up, Mrs. Livingstone ended the sentence — "that you will both love each other as I love you."

Mildred turned to the mirror over the mantel

and removed her hat. The attitude revealed the long line of her slender figure, giving it a kind of free, almost boyish grace, as though she were some spirit of the spring morning caught into a conventional mould; and George reflected as she came towards the table and took her place, brushing back the hair from her forehead with one hand, that she was more thoroughly a girl that morning than he had ever seen her before. Though when she was opposite him, he saw plainly the sharp shadows beneath her eyes which even the glow of the ride had not dispelled and which lent to her face a wistful charm that was very gentle.

There might have been no meeting between them so far as she gave evidence of by look or gesture, yet twice while talking to Mrs. Livingstone he had turned quickly and found her studying him. The conversation began and went on smoothly, impersonal with a strain of intimacy through it, which the small table, the informal little room, and the exclusion of the servants accentuated. George often thought of it afterwards as the most beautifully home-like of all his experiences.

Before they had finished breakfast Walter Emery had sought George to carry him off to the golf links with Edith, and the two women, left alone, sat silent a few minutes, both brooding over the personality of the man who had just left them, each with the breadth of the world in the dissimilarity of their thoughts. Finally Mrs. Livingstone rose from her chair and went towards the window.

"I am so happy, Mildred," she murmured, as she stood with the sunlight streaming over her,

symbolic in its glory. "He is all that I could ever have wished; though, at times, it makes me a little jealous to think that I have had no part in his influences. Yet — what have I to complain of now that he is with me? Only — can it last — can it go on? Sometimes — I get the idea it is only for a day, a dream that will go out and leave me in darkness forever. I love him so. I love him so. It is almost wrong to love him as I do; it makes me forget everything else. It seems to me now to be the motive of my existence." She turned back from the window to the table. "Ah, Mildred, you feel that it will last — don't you? Do you remember the first time you saw him, you told Winston and me that you thought him so crude?" she smiled leniently. "You were mistaken, dear, weren't you?"

Mildred sat at the table, her elbows resting before her and supporting her chin.

"Yes, Aunt Constance, woefully mistaken."

"And what do you think of him now?"

"Now — I think he is magnificently clever."

"What do you mean by that, dear?"

Mildred lowered her head a moment, then looked up at Mrs. Livingstone irresolutely. At first there was hesitation in her attitude, doubts fully alive in her eyes; then, settling over her face came the deep flush of wounded pride.

"Wouldn't you call it clever, Aunt Constance, for a man to sit at a dinner table and tell the story of a woman's life to a crowd of people who will only make use of it for their amusement afterwards? One of them, no doubt, will send it to the papers so

that it will appear in glaring headlines. And wouldn't you call it clever that he did this in such a way that no one can accuse him of doing it intentionally? Of course he could maintain that he did not know that the man was my husband."

Mrs. Livingstone turned quickly and went to Mildred's side, laying a restraining hand on her shoulder.

"Hush, dear, you don't know what you are saying. What in the world made you think he meant Hampton?"

"But it is true — I know it."

"No, dear, it is only your imagination. If he had known anything like that about you he would have written to me. Surely you are entirely wrong."

"Aunt Constance, listen to me a moment. I went to him last night when all of you had retired. I saw him in a smoking-room window and went down there to ask him if it were not Hampton he was talking about."

Mrs. Livingstone's hand was trembling now, and she leaned against Mildred's chair to steady herself.

"And what did he tell you?"

"He confessed it. It was Hampton. He was with him when he died; he alone was at the burial. He knew he was my — my husband all the time." She broke off with a dry sob, her head sinking to her hands on the table.

Mrs. Livingstone leaned over her, her eyes quickly filling with tears. Laying one hand on the girl's hair she caressed it.

"Poor — poor girl. I know what a shock it must be to you. But I don't understand," her

brows drew together. "He must have known that it would have made you suffer."

Suddenly Mildred straightened up and brushed her hand across her eyes.

"Don't give me your sympathy wrongly, Aunt Constance," she said, her face a little pale. "It's like heaping coals of fire upon me to think that I am sorry for Hampton's death. It is the greatest relief I have ever known, and I believe you will not misjudge me for saying that. I did not love him, and I was bound to him through principle. But the humiliation — this telling of the story in public before I even knew it! Of course it must come out now. It was all done to crush me," she exclaimed passionately, "and I ought to detest him, to hate him, to show him to every one as he is."

Mrs. Livingstone grasped her companion's hand in a firm grip.

"Look at me, Mildred," her voice was low and vibrant. "You are not telling me the truth. What do you mean by all this?"

For a second the fire of resentment was in the eyes of both.

"Ask him if it is not true."

"But why should he have done this? You talk in parables. I don't understand any of it. You are holding back something."

Mildred's hand went out and drew the pot of hyacinths closer to her. Breaking off a stalk of blossoms she began tearing it to pieces, all the while with tightly closed lips.

"If he wanted to humiliate you, there must have been a reason," Mrs. Livingstone went on after

waiting for an answer, her eyes still clouded with questions. "What reason could he have for wishing to do you any harm?"

Still the girl remained silent, a deep colour coming slowly into her face and reaching to her hair.

"I must know, Mildred."

"Yes — he did have a reason, Aunt Constance," she burst forth suddenly. "But I don't want to tell you. Please don't ask me."

Mrs. Livingstone sought the young girl's eyes and rested her hand firmly on her shoulder.

"Mildred, there must be a thorough understanding between us. What you have told me hurts me because it was not manly of him, because — it reflects upon his honour. You must tell me if anything could have given him an excuse for doing this."

The silence widened between them. A servant entered the room to clear the table; Mrs. Livingstone waved him back with a quick gesture. Finally she sank into a chair and waited.

"Aunt Constance," Mildred lifted her eyes and looked away, "perhaps I gave him that right," she went on hurriedly. "At least he made me think I did last night. It happened the first time I saw him, that night I told you both I had spoken to him alone before he went away. I told him that I did not believe in his story or in him, that he was an impostor, a liar, a cheat. I told him he could show if there was any spark of manhood in him by going away forever."

Mrs. Livingstone's eyes widened with amazement, then quickly deepened into pained anger.

"Mildred! You spoke that way to him!"

The young woman turned at the new note of anger in her aunt's voice. It was the first time she had ever heard it.

"Suppose he had done as you told him — what then would have become of him — of me?"

"Aunt Constance, don't misunderstand me; don't you know it was all through my love of you that I was doing it?" Her eyes suddenly filled with scalding tears. "Please see it as I did. I did not believe in him as I frankly told you, and I did not want you tricked into thinking him honest. You do see — don't you?"

"What did he say? How did he answer you?" came the unnaturally quick question.

"Oh, he said the same thing he says now; that he insisted on nothing — that he only asked you to try to find out if there was any truth in it — that he demanded nothing of you. That was all, only," she stirred uneasily in the chair, then settled back with a thoughtful expression, "he looked at me with that fearful look in his eyes as if he were going to crush the life out of me. I was frightened — and fascinated. Do you know the look I mean?"

Mrs. Livingstone moved her head in negation, her eyes searching Mildred's, still full of doubts and hope and lurking fears.

"But you must know what I mean, Aunt Constance," the girl rushed on, rising with the emotion that was moving her and slipping on to the arm of her aunt's chair. "It is the look of a conqueror, the man who wipes obstacles out of his way through sheer will force. He would crush the world if it were necessary to carry out his purpose. His eyes be-

come dark, almost black, and yet in them there are flashings of steely grey; they glitter, they scintillate, they are electric. Don't you remember those magnificent, awful mountains we saw in the West? They are there in his eyes — I can see them as plain as if they were there before me. They frightened me, and so does he — and yet I find myself looking for that expression, hoping that it will come and yet afraid for it to come, because it fascinates me, it makes me want to bow down in an agony of relief and submission."

Mrs. Livingstone drew away from the girl, and rising, crossed the room.

"You are talking to me about a man I do not know."

Mildred followed her, slipping her arm around her waist as they stood together at the window.

"Why has he impressed us so differently?" Mrs. Livingstone said, after a long pause.

"Because no one can show anything but his best side to you, Aunt Constance. You bring out the best in every one. Last night, when I came upon you and him in the library, I saw an expression on his face and in his eyes that was beautiful. It was your influence, and it resembled you strangely. It was the first time that I ever thought he might be your son."

Suddenly Mrs. Livingstone's manner softened, and she turned to the girl and drew her head down to her shoulder.

"And last night," Mildred went on in a lower voice, "when we were alone in the smoking-room, he told me a great deal of his past life, how he had

suffered, the poverty he had endured, and of the one hope of his life which I had tried to crush out of him. Somehow, afterwards, my resentment of his treatment of me, my dislike of him, or whatever it was, lessened, and finally died away entirely. This morning I found myself struggling to gather my forces to battle against him — but I cannot — I cannot." She pressed her face close against the older woman's and held it there a moment. "I don't know what it is — I don't think I am in love with him — I am sure I'm not — but he has fascinated me in some way."

Mrs. Livingstone met her eyes and smiled a little sadly.

"Mildred, you are still talking to me about a man I do not know. Ah, I see now," and she smiled radiantly, "he did want to tell me all this last night, and I would not let him!"

CHAPTER XVI

AN IMPORTANT INTERVIEW

RETURNING from the golf links with Edith and Walter, George went directly to his room to dress before luncheon. With the lessening of excitement which the tramp across the fields had brought him, and the peaceful surroundings of his room which he had sought for a half-hour's escape from the guests of the house, he was better able to view his immediate future with a measure of calmness. So much had the present claimed him heretofore, that no room had been left for reasonable speculation. Alone, with quieted passions, he let a disturbing thought which he had crushed down take the important place he had known from the first it was destined to hold. Something definite had been decided upon in regard to him; Mr. Livingstone had referred to it; Mrs. Livingstone had spoken of his going West. In that George felt a lurking danger. The West represented to him Barton, and out of more immediate impressions, he found himself projecting his thoughts back to the last interview they had had; yet, out of the mass of details, he realised, with a sickening kind of weakness, that in his endeavour to push that part of his career into a vague background, he had actually lost the sharp points of it. That it was merely conjecture on his part, this anticipating of Barton's reappearance, steadied him again so that when he

went down to luncheon he had again forced it back to what he liked to think of as a proper oblivion.

The early afternoon passed quickly with a short drive to a neighbouring estate where Walter insisted that George should be taken to meet "the most corking girl in the world" who, to Walter's chagrin, had not been at home; afterwards the return, with a conversation on the terrace with Miss Neilson and some of the other guests. Throughout the day George had exerted himself with each of his companions, though beneath his animation was a pre-occupation that he could not keep from showing occasionally, above all when he found Mrs. Livingstone looking at him with a different expression of interest than he had noted before. When she had bidden him good-bye until teatime, he felt a sweeping relief, for with the happiness that her presence brought him was always blended the dread of himself, and the danger that was such an integral part of their relationship. He insisted to himself that after several days, perhaps a week, he would have quieted forever the abnormal situation his imagination had conceived in his relation to her; after all, it was only the effect of a highly sensitised nature forced too suddenly.

Left alone in the hall, he strolled onto the porch and was passing the grouped windows which opened into the library, when he saw Mr. Livingstone sitting within, alone. George stopped and looked at him a long time, his egoism touched subtly with the idea that the world would soon believe that this man was his father. It was such a gullible old world; he half smiled at the absurdity of the thing, and yet, if he

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had fooled them into thinking that, why was it not possible to carry almost anything else through? Ah — but that was what hurt so — that robbed everything of the satisfaction his development began to crave. Would he never be able to stand firm and say, straight through his conscience, that all was truth? The smile died on his lips, and he passed on down the porch. At the end he turned swiftly, caught in the impatience of uncertainty. Why not know now the definite something which had been planned?

"I saw you through the window," he said, entering the room and going up to the desk where Mr. Livingstone sat. "I thought I would come in here and sit with you — if I am not disturbing you."

Mr. Livingstone turned in his chair, took off his glasses and looked up at George.

"No, indeed, — you are not disturbing me. I was going to send for you anyhow in a few minutes, as soon as I got through looking over these papers, which, by the way, I want to show you. But that can wait."

He pulled the papers together and put a heavy weight on them.

"Have you enjoyed your day?" he resumed. "I thought I would not disturb you just yet with any business. I wanted you to enjoy yourself to the fullest. Cares come quick enough. You see," his face lighted up pleasantly, "I have not forgotten I was once a boy."

George flushed with the warmth of pleasure at the thoughtfulness and consideration the older man gave

him; even yet he had still to learn to take it as a matter of course.

"It seems to me that my boyhood is just beginning," he answered. "I don't believe I had any youth, and now that it is coming to me I begin to feel that all the weakness and childishness of that period is struggling for acknowledgment. I am not as strong as I was when I first came to you."

Mr. Livingstone's expression deepened into interest, and under his kindly personality George felt the wells of his nature open and flood out towards him. He had the same sensation that had swept over him during their first interview — a feeling of talking to him out of the real honesty of his soul. What a wonderful relief it would be to tell him everything!

"Why not give up to this weakness for a while? Perhaps it would bring back your strength, as you put it, firmer than ever."

"If I only could. It is my nature to take everything seriously — a habit grown into character. One can't lose a thing like that."

"Yet you seem easy enough in your manners. I noticed you last night and to-day. It is wonderful how you have adapted yourself."

"That is because I cover up the technique. If you only knew how I have worked and studied and observed. But it has been my greatest pleasure. Sometimes though, when I am with people who seem to have no special object in life but a good time, it gives me a lonely feeling. I am not really of them — it is all make believe. Don't you think one must be bred to that sort of thing?"

Mr. Livingstone listened thoughtfully.

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"You will get over that after a while. You forget that your situation has been unusual. It was natural that you should take it hard — I am glad you have. You told me once, I remember, that you had never had friends; now you must begin to make them. Contact and association in business or a profession will bring that out in you, and show you also the necessity and assistance and pleasure friends can give you. It is a man's duty to himself to make them; there is something wrong with the one who does not."

"You misunderstand me, I think," George responded quickly. "It was not that I did not want friends — it was that I could not get the kind I wanted. And then, my determination to climb to something better filled my earlier days so that I did not want to waste valuable time; and you know, making friends does take time. Now, — all that is passed. I am among people I like, and I have a constant stimulus to make them like me and consider me worth liking."

"I am glad to hear you talk that way." Mr. Livingstone leaned back in his chair comfortably. "It shows that you have an appreciation of true values. But never fear — people will like you. You have a quality which draws one to you — it was that which made me listen to you that first night you came to me. It may be force, magnetism, enthusiasm, — call it what you please, — it is going to carry you through life successfully."

"It gave me no success until I came to you."

"Yes — but it gave it to you then. Perhaps the years of struggling developed these qualities."

"Then you believe everything is a preparation?"

"Yes — and a preparation to bring out the best that is in us."

"But if we crush down that best?"

"It will come out in the end — it is the supreme law of Nature."

George relaxed from his intensity and selected a cigar from the tray near him. In the slight pause he rose and held a lighted match to Mr. Livingstone's cigar.

"But to return to the question of friends," the old man resumed, blowing a cloud of smoke about him. "I don't mean to lay too much stress on that. A great many people think the number of their friends is an advertisement of their success: Most often it is the other way. It is the quality of one's friends that counts. If a man be honest, and by honest I mean to himself as well as to the world, he will make a position that will bring friends to him without the asking. After all, confidence is the basis of it. If we did not have confidence in those we love, what a miserable thing life would be. And it speaks so quickly in a man's manner — don't you think so? It gives him a dignity and assurance that nothing else in the world can."

George stirred in his chair, lowered his eyes for a moment, then raised them again to Mr. Livingstone. He caught his breath with a sharp relief when he saw that the old man had wheeled in his chair and was looking away from him, smoking reflectively. After a long pause, he took up the conversation again.

"As for ourselves," he said, resting his hand on

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the pile of papers on his desk, "you have come back after two years of travel and study. I have been watching you all the time. Did you know it?" He smiled confidently at George.

"It was not necessary for me to know it."

"Yes — but for me, it was all important. I knew absolutely nothing about you. It was a test and you made good. I have the feeling now that all that is passed. Do you?"

"I don't think I quite understand."

"I mean I have confidence in you, and you must surely have it in me now. Is there anything that you have kept back from me that I should know?"

His black eyes, piercing now in their searching through and through him, made George grip the arms of the chair with a quick sensation of danger. Under the other's steady fire of truth he felt that he sat before him utterly naked.

"You mean about my birth — my parentage?" George struggled with the words.

"That — or anything else."

"You know I have never insisted that I was your son."

"I know — I know. Would to God that we did have something definite."

George sprang from his chair and went up to Mr. Livingstone, grasping his hand with both his own.

"Thank you for that," he murmured, choking a little. "It will help make me worthy of you." Meeting each other's eyes thus, the truth of desire showing in their glances, each felt a bond of sympathy slowing riveting them together forever.

Come what might now, George knew that this moment was going to be a leading force.

"Let us bury that question for good now."

"Can we?" George murmured still holding his hand, "— with Mrs. Livingstone?"

The old man's face wrinkled suddenly with the problem.

"It is her happiness to think you are her son. Women are so different from us — they can persuade themselves into believing what they wish to believe. You know that she has given you her love — entirely?"

"Yes — I know." George let go his hand and stepped back a little. "But you? — I?"

Mr. Livingstone's face changed quickly. When he spoke again the light of deep interest was illuminating his features.

"You and I — we can go on making the best of it — fooling ourselves a little — if it will help us. Perhaps some day, one can never tell, something will prove the certainty to us. For the present — you have come to me as a son, and I want the pleasure that has always been denied me of sending one whom I could call, at least in a measure, my own, out into the world with advice and help and encouragement, and with the knowledge that when things became difficult and discouragement piled up too thick, he could come back to me for the comfort and safety and help that my father always gave me. You are going to give me that opportunity. The only thing that troubles me is that the best part of my life is behind me — there is not a great deal of time left for me to help you — and

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there is so much for me to teach you out of my experience."

He threw off with a gesture of effort the effect upon himself of the last words, and turned to the desk. Laying his cigar aside, he picked up the pile of papers and began sorting them.

"It will no doubt surprise you, when I tell you that one of my most valuable investments in late years was made out West, though I personally have taken no active part in it. And I know it will surprise you still more to know that you worked in my agent's office for a short while — I mean with Allston at Stone Creek. Mr. Barton, whom you remember, I think, has had the entire management of the investment, which, by the way, is in my wife's name. But I forget, you did know Barton represented me there, didn't you? However, up to a few years ago the income was quite satisfactory, but lately, to be exact, during the last two years, the demands for improvements and constant strikes have increased to such an extent that, as an investment, it has practically paid nothing. Mr. Barton's explanations are plausible enough — he thinks eventually the previous good dividend will be restored. Lately, however, I have grown a little doubtful of his hopeful view. I want some one to go to this place and get details and accurate information about what is being done and make a report on it. I looked around for a long time for a suitable man and it came to me finally, as an inspiration, that it would be a splendid thing for you to do. That is why I cabled you to come back. You know the country and are familiar in a way with that kind

of life. What do you think of making that your beginning? Confidentially, I thought I would not say anything to Barton about it, so that you could get your own impression of the work without his opinion. Not that I do not trust him, you understand, but that I think it would give you a freer hand."

He lifted his eyes from his papers and rose quickly when he saw the ghastly face confronting him.

"What is the matter? Are you ill?"

George put his hand to his brow with a determined movement and finally gained a slight control over himself.

"It is nothing," he got up, struggling to his feet and going to the window. "I shall be all right in a minute. I suppose it's vertigo — I have had several attacks lately."

His voice came back to him strange and unnatural through its forced steadiness. While he leaned against the window frame Mr. Livingstone rang for the butler. George saw the movement and interrupted him.

"I don't want a thing. It will pass in a moment."

"But you must take this glass of water. There, drink it all." The old man handed the glass to George. "You say you have had several attacks?"

"Yes — I consulted a doctor — he said it was nothing serious. I interrupted you — you were saying something about Mr. Barton and Stone Creek."

He walked firmly back to his chair and sat down. His face, losing its pallor through the effort he made to control himself, took on a more natural expres-

sion, though the lines about his mouth deepened and changed his expression into one of sudden age.

"You do not feel well enough to hear about it now. To-morrow we will take it up again. You feel better now?" Mr. Livingstone was standing near George and looking down at him kindly.

"Please don't think I am ill. Won't you continue? I assure you I am all right now. You say you want me to go out there and investigate the matter for you?"

"No — you are still pale. I think you had better go to your room. Indeed — I insist; and don't bother about coming down for dinner."

The affectionate pressure of his hand on his shoulder brought George to his feet. Involuntarily he walked again towards the window so that his back was to the room.

"I think the fresh air will brace me up," he said, after a short pause. "I shall go out for a little walk. But to-morrow — we must go on with the subject. I am very much interested in it."

He opened the window and walked out on the porch without looking back.

When he was gone, Mr. Livingstone closed the window after him and went back to his desk, sitting down and letting his face sink into his hands, the papers forgotten as he stared vacantly before him.

"If I could only find some way to prove it," he mused. "If I could only be sure that he was my son."

CHAPTER XVII

A PLEA FOR THE TRUTH

GEORGE crossed the verandah unsteadily, then cut out across the lawn at a rapid pace. He had no object in view, being impelled only by the need of some physical action. The fast approaching evening, with a hint of chill in the air, brought him a slight sensation of regained strength; and as he went farther and farther from the house, and at last into a dense wood, the old steadiness of nerve came back to him.

Walking on and on, the hopelessness of his situation beat itself into the very fibers of his being. Everything had crumbled away with the mention of Barton's name. Instinctively he had known all along that that chapter of his life was not closed, struggle as hard as he might to shut the doors of memory on its quiet, insinuating voice; and to have it flashed upon him so unexpectedly, at a moment when all the good in him was rising to meet the trust of the kind old man, had made him lose all self-control. It had caught him with his bulwarks unmanned. And the crushing part of it all was that he must go, he must do it — the first task given him could not be pushed aside and neglected. It was a test put upon him, a sort of gauge which was to measure his capacity for future undertakings that would be greater and greater. He laughed aloud,

long, harshly, mirthlessly, at the humour of it — that this first test should be the last one; for what could he do? Did not Barton have him tied hand and foot? Through the rage of failure he began to see more clearly what he should lose, the future glowing more and more brilliant, more enticing, more gorgeous as it became more unattainable. He saw it now, not only as the place filled with the luxuries of existence, but a world in which, through Mr. Livingstone's training and advice, he would have grown into a man whose power would have been felt.

He walked on faster and faster, the intense quiet of the woods making him start at the snapping of each twig. He felt that something within him would soon snap and end everything — his overstrained nerves had seemingly come to the limit of endurance. Then followed a great, almost uncontrollable desire to get away from all the unrest of the last few days.

What was it leading him to anyhow? It had all become chaos, in which he was being whirled about at a dizzying speed, turned first by one motive, then hurled on to another. Why should he live at all? Why had he been born? He had never had but this one chance, and it had resolved itself into two short years — and now, all that horrible past was to come back again. He threw out his arm and clenched his fist in impotent rage. Again he laughed. After all, what mattered, — who cared?

Suddenly he stopped. Out of the shadows of the wood Mrs. Livingstone's face rose before him as he had seen it that morning when he entered the breakfast-room. She loved him. It was too obvious to

be mistaken. His features contracted with a spasm of pain. She had said herself that she could not bear the thought of finding out that he was not her son; yet, now she would have to know. With a rush the blood mounted to his brain and pounded like cannon, and in its heat he knew that a new desire had sprung into life which strengthened him like the wonder of a miracle. Back over him rushed the courage of determination, the energy of his masterful mind; his thoughts grew calmer; a smile quivered across his lips; the blood flowed back and left his head calm and cool. With a flash he had seen that the object of his life, as he had realised that morning, was from now forward to be to protect her, to keep her from ever finding him out.

He felt as if he had awakened from some frightful nightmare. All the unspeakable horrors and doubts and fears faded off into a mist under the influence of this new idea. His self-assurance came back at the call of necessity and he smiled at the weakness which had made him fear the situation. He could master it, of course he could; he had done it before, and he knew his strength now even better than when he had met Barton the first time. Still, it was more serious than the first combat. It was going to test his ability severely. Again he laughed, with the rush of another thought. What a fool he had been! All that was necessary was for him to go out West and telegraph Barton to meet him there. Mr. Livingstone wanted nothing but a confirmation of Barton's report, which would be easy enough to arrange between them. With a flash of deep intuition he saw that what had brought the upheaval of the last

hour was his growing, at times uncontrollable, yearning to be worthy of the love and trust of these people. That he must go back to the slime and dishonour of haggling with Barton was but another convincing proof that he must deaden all of his standards of truth. It was a closed book which he must nerve himself to keep shut forever; in that lay his success, his happiness, his life — and he could do it, he would.

He turned back towards the house with his head held high, his disordered hair tossed back by the breeze, his eyes gleaming out of the flush of his face full of the light of conquest.

Twilight had fallen. A broad streak of crimson lay on the horizon outlining the distant mountains — all the rest of the expanse of sky was dull grey. He took out his watch and looked at it. They must be at tea now, he thought; then he decided to stay out a little longer. After all, the quiet was not so disagreeable; it would steady him so that he would be in good shape, as he phrased it, for dinner. He took out his cigarettes and lighted one, wondering why he had not thought of smoking before.

Pushing his way through a narrow path with a virility in his stride that made his step light and buoyant, he came presently to a cleared opening in which a pool of water, a fountain and a semi-circular stone bench made a resting place full of charm and suggestive of old-world romance. The crimson sky, shining through the slender branches of the trees, was reflected in the shimmering surface of the water.

He stopped near the pool and started, swinging

around when he had seen Mildred's reflection in the water. For a moment he said nothing, drinking in the beauty of her presence which shone in the last glow of sunset. Her hand supported her head as she leaned back against the stone bench, her pose suggesting thoughtfulness; the transparent somber shades of her gown which showed the shimmer of rose beneath; the bunch of violets at her waist; the perfect accord of her dark hair against her rich skin — all made her appear to George as the outcome of some wild extravagance, the product of endless years of thought and labour and love.

He moved towards her, thrilling with the knowledge that another goal awaited his victory — the winning of this exquisite product of wealth and success.

"I am glad you are here," he said, his voice full of new-found power. "You are the one I need most just now — the one who can help me more than all the rest."

Mildred looked up at him, quick to see the evidences of some great emotion which had left him glowing still with magnificent vitality. His sex power, the thrill of his virile presence, the heat even of his dynamic personality, flooded out to her and held her as the night before.

She shook her head before answering and looked away from him.

"No — you don't need me; — you don't need any one."

George slipped on to the bench beside her and took her hand in his, holding it to his lips.

"Yes — I need you to help me on to victory."

She looked at him slowly, feeling already the victory he spoke of through the mastery of his eyes.

"You can help me to it," he went on, "through your beauty. You make it all so much more worth while struggling for. I wonder if you know how beautiful you are," his voice lowered. "That first night I saw you, you came into my life to stay. I loved you from that moment."

Her hand remained in his, though she had turned her face from him.

"You mean — you hated me."

"Well — even if it were that — it was an intensity of passion that filled every day of those two years." He let go her hand and moved a little farther from her. "I am going away in a few days," he added, watching her closely.

She turned swiftly and looked at him.

"Going away — where?"

"Out West, where I came from."

"For how long?"

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully before he answered.

"I don't know."

"You mean —"

"Mr. Livingstone asked me to go to look into some of his interests out there. I am glad — in a way. I think I am more contented doing things — probably it's my mission in life."

Mildred leaned back more easily.

"I thought at first that — perhaps —" She left the sentence unfinished.

"You thought that you were right — and I wrong. Ah, I see. You don't trust me yet." George smiled into her eyes. "You don't — do you?"

She did not meet his smile, though she looked at him seriously.

"Yes — I do — when I'm with you."

"And when you are not —"

"I don't know. I think — I think I should like to hate you."

"I know why you can't. It's because there's something akin in our natures. With all the world of convention between us, I believe we have the same sympathies — only you have never had to do anything, or to feel anything. Mildred," he was suddenly vehement, "come go out into the world with me and help me go up and up. We can do it together. Nothing could ever down us. We could make it magnificent."

The evening stillness grew hushed about them; the crimson of the sky was fading into pale rose before the onrush of night.

"You say that because you don't know me. You think you do; no one does, really."

"I thought I did not until last night. Now I'm sure of you."

She flushed and turned away.

"You would make a splendid fighting partner — not only a sweetheart, but a friend too."

"It is a generally accepted theory that women do not make good friends," she answered lightly.

"That may be; I am not talking of women — I am talking of you."

"And a philosopher once wrote," she went on, smiling, "that a slave did not dare have a friend, and that a tyrant could not afford to, and woman, being a combination of both, was thus incapacitated for friendship."

"Nor is that applicable. I see nothing of the first characteristic in you."

"And the latter?"

George smiled winningly.

"I don't fear that — either."

"And you said last night — at least you implied it — that I was a slave to convention. How could I be a good friend if I am not brave enough to act as I feel?"

George viewed the encroaching dusk thoughtfully.

"You would not be afraid to act as you felt in a crisis."

"There will never be a crisis in my life," she answered, almost listlessly. "It is going to be humdrum all the way through. I don't see anything before me but a dead level — unless —" She stopped suddenly as if regretting that she had spoken so plainly.

"Unless you will let yourself go and not try to fight everything that might stir you. There is no reason for you to let circumstances rule you. You are a free woman."

For a second her face clouded, then she raised her shoulders indifferently.

"The usual way a man looks at a woman. He says she is free to make her life what she wishes," she rushed on impatiently. "There is no such thing as freedom for a woman; it is all a fallacy that we read about. Even those who do actually break away from the conventions shackle themselves for life with the world's disapproval. We are not even allowed to choose a life partner, but must sit back and be contented with the best man who offers himself. I know what all these dreams of freedom are."

Her lips twisted into a bitter smile. "I had them, and what have I done with them? — made a dismal failure of everything." She stretched out her hands with a gesture of utter futility.

George watched her every movement with glowing eyes; the colour coming into her face, the sparkle of her glance, the intensity of spontaneousness which coloured her voice. He tingled with a joy that her presence brought, and with it came a deeper appreciation of his craving for her. Again he moved nearer and held her eyes.

"Mildred,— I need you. Will you help me? A time comes in every man's life when he has to go to some one for advice — for help. A fellow goes along in the full swing of his assurance, feeling that no one can tell him better what to do than he already knows; then, suddenly, something happens, and he sees for the first time that he does not know what to do at all — that he needs direction. I have felt that need lately — particularly since I have been here. Take, for instance, last night. If I had had some one to go to I might not have done what I did — I might not have been ashamed of myself afterwards. You understand what I mean, don't you? You see how in my development I am going to need some one more and more."

"Even so," Mildred interrupted him quickly, "after you have sought advice, you will find that it is not the assistance you expected — you will go back to your old belief in yourself. No two people look at a thing in the same way. There are so many individual details that form our opinions for us."

"I don't think I should ever feel that way with

you," George said, choosing his words carefully. "You have always impressed me as wonderfully direct and straightforward. There is hardly one woman in a thousand that would have said to me what you did that first night. You are honest and dependable; you have force and determination; you ought to do something great."

She made a movement as if to rise, then settled back against the bench and turned to him.

"What could I ever do that would be great?"

"Go with me to seek it. I don't know yet what it will be, but we can find it together."

Suddenly her manner changed; she leaned nearer to George, and one hand sought his shoulder while the other tightened on his hand.

"Before it is too late — and it is not yet — tell me if you can lead me to such happiness. There is only one way."

"Tell me and I shall do it."

Their faces were close together, her hair brushing against his forehead, her eyes burning, searching into his.

"Have you been honourable straight through? — Will you be so to the end? — Has the power you have, — oh yes, I have felt it from the moment I first saw you, — has it not led you to dare what you knew was not right? I can't bear the thought of it, and yet I have it. I can't crush it out. I shall never ask you again — only tell me this once. There is great good in you, and I want to help you, I want to love you, I shall, I know now, but tell me first — tell me that there is no reason for me to fear. Ah, you can't! — you can't!"

George threw off her hand and turned from her. In the sudden pallor of his face she had found his fear. Sitting there, with night about them, he heard a sob break from her. Suddenly he straightened up and looked at her; in the darkness she had grown into a vague outline.

"You doubt me! You don't believe in me."

"No — I know now. It is a lie — all that you have said and done!"

George found himself counting the seconds; if he could find something to say, something to crush out the suspicion she had drawn from his weakness.

"Give me time. I can prove to you that you are mistaken," he cried at last. "You must do that — you must! Give me two weeks. I can do it in that time!"

"How?"

"I don't know — but I shall find a way. Only trust me a little longer — promise me that — will you? I swear to you that I shall prove to you that I am worthy of it!"

He sought her hand in the darkness and clung to it.

"There is only one way," her voice came to him on the stillness of the night, and with a subtle quality that sank into his consciousness, to remain there forever. "There is only one way. And if you are worthy of my trust, you will find it."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TURNING POINT

GEORGE boarded the train two days later with a feeling of infinite relief. Three days and three nights, free from the external necessities that had so filled his hours recently, lay before him ; and the sigh of weariness that escaped him was the expression of a far-reaching contentment in knowing that the treading of devious ways was, at least during the journey, to be delayed.

The last day had been peaceful enough, filled with an interview of several hours with Mr. Livingstone, in which together they had gone into the details of the mine and its development, which had led so successfully, during the last two years, towards the object that Barton had conceived. It was cleverly worked out to the finest point, and George realised, as he went deeper and deeper into it, that to one without a clue it was pre-eminently reasonable ; it was also with a great relief that he found this the case, seeing that any report that he should make after a personal examination could be accepted without a question, provided he and Barton were the only parties consulted. At luncheon he was alone with Mr. and Mrs. Livingstone and Mildred, the guests having departed ; at dinner they were together again, the conversation so genially impersonal, with its undercurrent of intimacy, that George had

enjoyed it keenly in the safe future it seemed to promise him. The morning he had left, he stood for a moment on the landing of the staircase, protected by the shadows, and looked down at the group gathered in the hall to bid him good-bye. Mrs. Livingstone sat a little apart from the others, her gaze directed towards the flood of sunlight sifting through the mellowed glass of the window, her hands clasped in her lap, and in the attitude so expressive of gentleness and tenderness and love which seemed always to emanate from her presence — the attitude that always stirred George with its potent suggestion. Mr. Livingstone sat by the central table reading, the outline of his handsome head silhouetted against the sheets of the newspaper. Mildred was sauntering restlessly about, one moment stooping to pat the greyhound that lay on the hearth rug, again rising and standing in an attitude of intent listening. In its presentation of those he had grown to love, set in the luxurious surroundings that were such an integral part of them, the scene represented to George a complete gratification of his desires; it gave a sharper edge to the background of his early life and strengthened him in his determination to hold on with all his might. That he wanted it to last was the predominating demand of his nature; that he was not worthy of it sank under this tangible vision of its beauties.

The first day on the train passed without analysis. The rapid flight of the scenery, as he looked out of the window, only accentuated the ever shifting luxury of his thoughts. He dwelt only on the penetrating joy of knowing that he had taken his place

among these people, and had won their interest, even their love. When the day had faded into night he went to bed early with a delicious sense of oncoming, peaceful sleep. In the middle of the night, he awoke in a cold sweat, startled into consciousness by weird, incoherent dreams, in which he had seen himself in a situation that his sub-consciousness had placed before him in pitiless verity. The rest of the night he lay awake, cold, at times shivering uncontrollably, and awaiting impatiently the dawn that he felt would steady him; but it did not. The vision of Mrs. Livingstone, the deep impress of their conversations, the subtle influence of her presence, returned with an insistence that the few hours' escape from them had given renewed strength. Relentlessly each concrete instance of it rose before him; the first moment he had felt it and had given the beggar a dollar, the letters that had sought him out at the ends of the earth and troubled the accomplishment of those days, the fear of her that he had felt on his return and the almost fatal result of their interview; — each memory held him in its grip and drove itself home with irresistible force, until, at last, in sheer torture, he rose from his seat and paced the aisle of the car, to the disgust of fretful passengers.

There was no argument left in him all through that day, and as he watched the porter lighting the lamps for the evening, he knew that the horror of another night had to be faced. In a fit of fanciful reverie he saw himself like a moth whirling ceaselessly around a dazzling light, approaching dangerously near, then circling off to regain renewed strength with which to approach closer to the fire. That this wonderful

deathlight was the honour, the truth, the love of his real nature, brought to him such a depth of agony that at moments it shifted into a thrilling joy when he realised that it was a part of him.

The morning of the third day he pulled himself together with a certainty that his trip would come to an end in a few hours — and that action lay before him. The dreams which had so completely dominated him fell asunder and left him face to face with the immediate situation. He pulled his grip from beneath the seat, ordered a table, and spread out a roll of documents and maps which Mr. Livingstone had given him. After a mature consideration of the subject he planned to do the work alone, getting the details he needed from personal inspection rather than depending upon Barton's veracity; indeed, he felt that a full conception of the plan, worked out and reinforced by figures and facts, would strengthen materially his position with Barton.

When the train pulled into the station he was still immersed in the details of Barton's reports, and had to rise hastily to get his things together and reach the platform before the train had moved on. He went directly to the hotel and registered, took the roll of papers from his grip, and, without further hesitation, struck out towards the office he knew so well.

A strange part of his mental condition, that did not strike him until later, was that he was absolutely unconscious of any external impression of his return to the town; he could have as easily been walking along a street in New York so far as consciousness of surroundings was employed. Even when he

mounted the stairs and knocked at the door, it was with no feeling of familiarity that he saw the door open and a young fellow, his successor, stand before him.

"I wish to see Mr. Allston. Is he here?"

"Yes, sir. Come in."

George entered a room — almost sumptuous in its handsome mahogany desks, leather chairs and heavy carpet — and stood still as Allston rose to meet him, no look of recognition on his face as he came forward. He was excessively cordial and made much of pulling forward a chair and insisting upon George taking it.

"I suppose you are Mr. Livingstone's representative. I had a telegram from him, saying that you would arrive to-day. I am sorry Mr. Barton is not here; however, I wired him as soon as I got the message from Mr. Livingstone, and he answered that he was leaving at once. That should put him here to-morrow. I believe your name is Thorpe — isn't it? — I think the telegram read that way."

"Yes," George answered quickly, with a relief that Allston had not caught his name. "But I don't think we need Mr. Barton — just yet," he continued, wondering over the man's ignorance of who he was, and realising later that Barton had been astute enough to keep a situation so full of danger from a man of Allston's weak caliber. "I did not know Mr. Livingstone intended to telegraph you. He gave me a letter of introduction to you."

"Then Mr. Barton did not know you were coming?" Allston's cordiality faded swiftly into anxiety.

"No — you see Mr. Livingstone thought it would be useless to disturb him, as he is interested in something else at present. Of course, if it had been a more important matter than it is, he would have insisted on his coming with me."

Allston's manner had not yet regained its former ease.

"You mean Barton had no idea of your coming here?"

"None in the least. He was not even consulted. I assure you it was not necessary," George answered placidly.

"Then it is fortunate I telegraphed him."

"Why?"

"Well — you see," Allston turned nervously under the scrutiny of George's gaze, "you see Mr. Barton knows all the details of this business so much better than I do. He has directed it practically by himself, and naturally it will be more satisfactory for you to see him." Allston leaned back more comfortably, with the satisfaction of feeling he had explained himself well.

George waited a moment, then began untying the roll of papers he had brought with him, putting in a question indifferently now and then and looking away so that Allston might answer at his ease.

"In the meantime," he went on, "while I'm waiting for Mr. Barton, I am sure it is entirely within your scope to tell me what I want to know. I only want a few things explained, a few figures here and there, and then, when Mr. Barton comes, I can discuss the subject intelligently with him."

"But what is Mr. Livingstone's idea — exactly?"

What does he want to know? Haven't Barton's reports been satisfactory?"

"Perfectly — but like all people who have a great many investments, he does not quite understand why this one should not be paying him as well as some of the others, and as formerly. I believe his idea is to put more money into it ; in other words, develop it in the direction Mr. Barton has pointed out." George ended with a reassuring smile that brought a responsive one from Allston's restored ease of mind.

Scattering the papers about him with studied indifference, George felt that Allston was gradually coming to the belief that, after all, it was not a matter of being held up, but more a development of opportunities to increase former "graft,"—exactly the impression he was striving to create. Talking without any special object, he began to appreciate the utter worthlessness of the man before him, and to see deeper and deeper into the diabolical cleverness of Barton in selecting an accomplice who would never raise a dissenting note.

Finally he came back directly to his subject.

"Mr. Livingstone asked me to make a report of this railroad to the mine. I believe it is five miles in length — from the map. I have the itemised cost of construction here, made by Mr. Barton. I believe it is his intention to extend it."

Looking at Allston indirectly George saw that his face had gone ashy.

"He realises that it is necessary, but right now feels it might be delayed," he went on reassuringly. "What do you think of it?"

"Yes — it might be," Allston answered quickly. "I had suggested that myself to Mr. Barton."

"Ah — I see you take a moderate view of it, too. Now — if you will help me with a few things here, I won't bother you very long, and I can make up a report that will satisfy Mr. Livingstone. After all, I think he only wants a satisfactory explanation; after that I am sure he will leave it all to Mr. Barton as before. In fact, perhaps what you can tell me will do better than what Barton will."

After that Allston seemed to fall completely into George's hands, bringing out maps and plans at his suggestion, opening ledgers, the footings of which George hastily copied, until several hours had gone by and the facts he needed passed into his possession. All along, though, he was careful to treat the whole matter as a half jocular, half boring affair, that, the sooner gotten through with, the better pleased he would be. Finally, he knew that his information was exhaustive enough to prove his case against Barton. Pulling out his watch, he looked at it and started up.

"I had no idea I had kept you so long. You must pardon me. By the way, though, can you tell me how to get out to the mine? I thought I should spend the day there to-morrow."

Allston fell back from him as if from an electric shock.

"You want to go out there? Why?"

"Oh, merely to pass the time away. If I must wait for Mr. Barton," he answered, starting carelessly towards the window, "I might just as well spend a day there."

"It's a pretty rough trip. Particularly now, since the railroad bridge was washed away in a recent storm."

George smiled over the beginning of excuses.

"I shan't mind driving in the least, if you'll send some one word to take care of me."

"Do you know what a mining camp is?"

"No — haven't the slightest idea."

"Well — if you take my advice you won't go."

"But I think it might be interesting."

"Then I'll go with you."

George broke into a friendly laugh.

"No, Mr. Allston, I won't permit that; first, because you have to go there often enough; and second, you would try to explain it all to me and that would bore me to death, I assure you. To tell you the truth, I am only going there so as to tell Mr. Livingstone I did it. You see — don't you?" He turned away and began rolling the papers together.

Some directions followed as to how to reach the mine, and at last George stood at the door shaking Allston's hand in parting.

"Tell Mr. Barton I shall be back day after to-morrow, and that if he happens to arrive before me, to wait until I return, if he cares to. Thank you again for all the trouble I have put you to."

A knock sounded on the door back of them. A messenger boy entered, holding out a telegram to Allston. With a word of apology to George he tore it open, and in the flash of relief on his face George knew it was from Barton.

"He will be here to-morrow — Mr. Barton, I mean. Will you wait for him?"

"Yes, but I'll go on to the mine anyhow — for to-morrow. I don't think he'd mind waiting for me."

With the absorption of the case lessened for the day, George, standing on the threshold, took in the room with a sweeping glance. Through the modern furnishings he suddenly saw its former bare walls, its old stove and unvarnished chairs. Under a cover of stain he saw the folding doors by which he had stood and listened to the words which had changed his whole life. How clear it all was, — his excitement, his temptation, his fall. Suddenly he found Allston's eyes questioning him.

"Good-bye," he said hurriedly, "until later."

Slamming the door behind him, he rushed down the steps and out onto the pavement where the sun was flooding the streets. How easy it had been, how naturally he had managed it, and how utterly common and dirty the whole thing had been. He shook himself with an attempt at throwing off the effects of it. Even his voice had taken on the inflection of the low meanness of the conversation, a sort of common phrasing that he felt, with a sickening sensation, was so prominently a part of the whole game. Unconsciously, as he hesitated on the pavement, the familiarity of the place came back with a rush; he recognised a "grocery store" across the street, a tramcar pulled by two mules crawled by at its customary pace, a saloon at the corner, proud beneath a glaring sign, accentuated its old-time importance. How dismal and shabby and hideous it was, and yet, how much a part of him, how ineradicably impressed upon his mind! — an influence which had made his own mental filth possible.

He walked down the street with his eyes wide open to the past, living it over once more with his old hatred made deeper through contrast. In the middle of the block he stopped abruptly before a frame building, and looking at it with a grim smile, finally went up the board walk that led to the door and rang the bell.

An old woman opened the door and stood before him questioning. A puzzled expression flashed into her faded eyes, then died away, leaving her face as dull and listless as before.

"I heard you took boarders," George explained, when she had asked him what he wanted. "I wish to see your rooms. Can you show them to me?"

The woman's eyes met his with dull amazement.

"I've got nothing that'd suit you." She shook her head wearily. "This is a place for poor folks — not the likes of you."

George's eyes dwelt on her during a short silence. Her threadbare garments, her coarsened, wrinkled hands, the jaded, worn-out expression of her face — none of the details of her poverty escaped him. It was a dismal picture of life lived almost to the end in utter dreariness, work and failure going hand in hand always.

"The front room upstairs might suit me," he said at last. "At least you could show it to me."

The old woman looked at him quizzically, and seeing that he stood firm, she moved back to let him enter, then preceded him up the narrow uncarpeted steps. In the front room he had mentioned she stood and watched him while he looked about. The

talked for a few moments about the prices of rooms, and then George turned into the hall.

"There are back rooms, I suppose," he said. "Are any of them unoccupied?"

"No — they're all taken. You wouldn't like 'em, I know." She began coughing violently as she ended, her gaunt frame quivering with the effort.

"May I look into this one for a moment?" George asked suddenly, his hand on the knob.

"That's my room. It's the smallest one in the house. Why do you want to see it?"

Already George had pushed open the door and was peering in. Its dismal aspect smote him like a blow; then he started and crossed the threshold.

"I want those books and that picture," he cried, suddenly turning back to the woman, with flushed face and glowing eyes.

"They ain't mine," the woman answered, frowning at him through her questioning of his strange behaviour.

"But you can sell them to me?"

"No — I tell you — they ain't mine. They belongs to a young man who used to live here. I guess he forgot 'em when he went away. Say — you know — I think you're actin' sort of queer. What are you up to, anyhow?"

"I am that young man, Mrs. Dodds."

"You! It ain't possible!"

"Yes — it is. I've just changed some — that's all."

She looked at him searchingly, then her eyes lit up with a spark of envy.

"Say — you've made good — haven't you?"

If you call it that, Mrs. Dodds."

She came a step nearer and looked at him closely. "Tell me — how did you do it — honestly?"

George fell back from her and grasped the knob of the door.

"Ah, I ain't tryin' to find you out. Don't let that be a-worryin' you. I just wanted to know, 'cause I've been workin' and workin' all my life — an' you see what it's brought me." She turned back to the room. "So you've come for your books and that picture. H — m — m. All right. Will you send for 'em?"

"Yes, I'll get a boy at once to take them to the hotel for me."

At the front door George drew out his pocketbook and crumpled some bills into his hand; then he turned to the old woman.

"You tried to be kind to me once, and I wouldn't let you," he said, a new note deepening his voice. "Do you remember? I didn't understand then—I do now." And pressing the bills into her hand he went out before she could answer him.

In his room at the hotel that night he stood at the window looking out over the little town, in a way, the prototype of the one he had grown up in. Far off, where the electric lights ended, rose the black shadow of mountains — huge monsters sleeping in the quiet of the spring night, yet overshadowing all the surrounding valleys with a somberness that seemed eternal. This was the country of his birth, he mused, the one which he had grown up to hate, and still the one out of which he had dug the nugget of gold. How somber and hard it still looked to

him! How full of foreboding! In its utter gloom he read the predestination of his doom.

He turned back to the room, unconsciously shuddering, and switched on the lights. The pile of old books and the picture placed on the table greeted him like friends come back to life; yet, somehow, as an undercurrent to his thoughts, he heard their sneer. What was the outcome of their friendship, their teaching, their help? He was not their product. Then, between them and the old school-master and the one who had given him all her mother-love, slowly developed before him, as the hours raced along, a binding flow of resemblance, — a tie that he saw at last as the symbol of his honour. He knew now that there was something that he did not understand, some unseen force at work which had brought these companions of the past back to melt into this miracle of the present. Even his visit to the lodging house seemed in accord with these influences, his gift to the old woman with the hacking cough a part of it. Her pitiful, hopeless face rose before him again in its utter lack of future, and he began to compare it with the face of the other woman; their ages, their grey hair, their need of some one to lean upon seemed to draw them together, and, at the same time, widen the gulf. The flashing idea of the other woman in a like situation gave him a poignant sense of pain.

Little by little he was beginning to understand himself. These sensations and sympathy for others had lost their first effect of making him wonder; they were growing into his daily attitude and were battling constantly at the doors of his egoism with a

force that he felt would soon sweep him out into an unknown sea.

He rose again restlessly and switched off the lights. Through the open window the dark mountains called to him ; and through the voice of the past which they conjured up, he felt again the undercurrent of an ominous future at work — a future which he was rapidly growing to long for and to dread.

Standing there a long time, the familiarity of the scene without brought back to him, painfully distinct, the first night of his temptation. Relentlessly, on and on, scenes of importance in his development strung themselves out before him, the key-note being struck when he first saw Mrs. Livingstone enter the library and come towards him, enveloping him from that moment with the ineffable tenderness of her love ; that had remained with him steadily. Through the interest and excitement of travel it had remained dormant until the first letter had come and the key-note had begun to ring again, soft for a while, then growing into such a force that it had finally shaken him to the foundations of his being. All the virility, the mastery of self, the clever thought of the man, had been beaten down before this quiet influence. He saw now how he had vainly tried to fight it, arguing again and again with himself until he got back a semblance of his strength ; but, through a deeper knowledge, seeing that he was gradually weakening, that all the old ideals and ambition of earlier training were linking themselves to her and forming a battle array against his conscience which left him without a shadow in which to hide from the glaring, pitiless light of truth.

The incidents of the day and the effect they had made upon him only added to the certainty that he now stood at the real turning point of his life. The process had been slow, but gradual, always steadily forward, and the seed which had been planted years before had grown into a tall plant which was now bursting into bloom. In one vivid flash, it seemed to him afterward, the full realisation of his dishonour burst upon him. He was a liar, an impostor, a thief, a man who had applied his God-given qualities to the basest methods of self-aggrandisement. What was there left to complete the whole but that he should be a murderer? He started from the window with a violent shudder. That is what he should be when she found him out! It would kill her!

A sharp knock on the door jarred him out of his reverie.

"A letter for you, sir — special delivery."

He grabbed at the envelope, his hand shaking violently when he recognised the heavy cream paper that had grown to represent his pain and his happiness. Tearing it open, he unfolded the pages and let the faint perfume permeate his senses as it had so often done before. Then he began to read, at first hastily, then slowly, and again, phrase by phrase, with his eyes resting from the pages after each period.

"One day has already passed," it ran, "and you cannot imagine how long it seems to me. There is not the same interest to awaken to in the morning for I know that I shall not see you to-day nor for many yet to come. But do not make them many — finish all this useless business and come back to me."

Winston and I have almost had a misunderstanding about you, the first we have ever had. I upbraided him for sending you away so quickly, and he answered that you wanted to go. Did you really? He said you were anxious to show him what you were capable of doing, that you wanted to prove that you were worthy of his utmost confidence; and I see now since he told me that, a sort of symbolism in your first task being done for me. I mean, as you know, that the mine is my property. But, after all, what do I care if you are a success that way or not? All I want is to have you with me all the time, to drive with me in the late afternoons now that the spring is growing so beautiful, to have you to turn to at any moment of the day, to hear your voice in the house when I am not listening for it — if that could ever be. I want you to sit beside me in the evening, after dinner when the house has settled down to peaceful quiet, when the lamps are glowing and the fire crackling, and the whole world is shut away from you and me. At such times you can tell me of each day of your life as far back as you can remember, not leaving out the slightest incident. In that way we can relive each day of our long separation. Then, I shall tell you of my life, too. It will all be like a fairy tale, won't it? — and to think I never had the joy of telling them to you. When I look back and think that all the little pleasures of motherhood, which make up the real happiness of a woman's life, have been denied me, I wonder if I can ever create them now that you have grown into a man away from me; though that is all I seem to be living for now. Think of me as often as you can, and feel that I am counting the minutes before you return. That will make you hasten back to me, I know. We are going back to town to-morrow. I am glad of this, because it

means that I am that much nearer to you. Mildred is going with me; she is beside me now as I write, and asks me to tell you that she, too, is anxiously awaiting your return."

George's head sank into his hand, and for the first time in his life scalding tears coursed down his cheeks. A long time afterwards he pulled himself together and staggered towards the window and stared out into the night.

"I must be worthy of her," he kept murmuring, over and over again. "I shall — I will. And there is only one way — I see it now. Great God! Why has all this come to me when it is too late?"

CHAPTER XIX

REACHING A DECISION

WHEN day broke, George turned away from the window with a strangely altered face; the youthful look had gone forever, the firm set of his mouth had developed and left two ineradicable lines on each side, and the shadows beneath his eyes accentuated the wonderful expression, always full of compelling interest, but now resplendent with the greatness of revelation.

With a deliberateness that showed no signs of uncertainty he made his preparations for the day, and having finished his toilet, rang for a cup of coffee, then seated himself at the table and began writing a detailed report of the Stone Creek mine, explaining elaborately the whole scheme of robbery from its inception. At noon he had completed the task, closed and sealed the papers in an envelope and put them in his pocket; then he packed his portmanteau and went down to the office of the hotel, leaving word that he would take the six o'clock train that evening going East. Outside the hotel, he walked on with the air of a man who had some object before him and knew exactly where it was leading him; in reality, it was only a physical force that demanded action as a mental safety valve. Any reason for going to the mine was absurd now; it had been lost sight of in the revelations of the night.

About four o'clock he turned back from the barren plane that lay at the foot of the mountains and retraced his footsteps into the town. Entering the hotel, he was confronted by Barton and Allston standing in the main door and evidently looking for him. Allston gave a start when George appeared and grasped Barton's arm to attract his notice. In the moment of approaching them, George saw the controlled look of amazement on Barton's face; evidently he had not expected two years to make such a marked difference.

"Mr. Barton has just come, and as they told me at the hotel that you had not gone out to the mine, we were wondering where we could find you. You have never met Mr. Barton, I believe." Allston rushed on with his explanations, while Barton and George were looking each other squarely in the eyes.

"Yes — I believe I have met Mr. Barton before," George said, without change of expression.

"I remember now — in New York, wasn't it?" Then turning to Allston, Barton continued, "Now, Allston, don't bother any more. We'll get along all right. If I need you to-night I shall send you word."

Together they entered the hotel while Allston cut out across the street.

"I suppose you want to discuss this matter with me," George said, with a note of infinite weariness showing in his voice.

"Yes — I want to know what in hell it all means."

"Will you go to my room?"

Barton nodded, and George stepped to the office to get his key.

Opening the door to his room, he stood aside to let Barton pass, entering afterwards and indicating a chair to his companion, while he threw himself heavily into another. For a few moments neither spoke. Then Barton lighted a cigar, still standing, and finally went up to George and looked steadily down at him.

"I never should have known you, I don't believe," he said at last. "Still — I might have known you were clever enough to get the best out of it." Then, meeting no responsive smile from George, he folded his arms and waited a second. "Well — what does it all mean — what have you got to say for yourself?"

George met his look, his face sphinx-like in expression.

"I have nothing to say to you, Mr. Barton. However, I am willing to listen to you until a few minutes before six. I am taking that train for New York."

"Pardon me for correcting you, but you are mistaken. You are not leaving on that train."

"No?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it would be a great mistake for you to go back to Mr. Livingstone with that batch of — er — incorrect information that you have. But you surely didn't think of doing that — did you? I suppose it was one of Allston's crazy ideas."

"No, he was right. I not only thought of doing it — I am going to do it."

Before he finished Barton had crossed to the door, locked it and slipped the key in his pocket; turning back, he met George's broad smile.

"Are you afraid I'll escape?"

"Yes" — with a shrug of the shoulders — "if you wish to interpret my action that way. It's perfectly clear to me you are either drunk or out of your mind. I had a suspicion at our first interview that you couldn't stand all this. But — to our subject — what are you doing out here?"

"Making a report on your robbery at Stone Creek — at Mr. Livingstone's request."

Barton's face blanched, and he threw a furtive glance around the room. When he replied his voice was discreetly lowered.

"Does he know?"

"Not yet."

Barton's eyes blazed down into George's as he leaned nearer to him.

"What are you driving at? Surely you know you can't go back there with this information. It would ruin the whole scheme."

"That is exactly what I mean to do."

"And for yourself — what do you expect?"

"Nothing. I have come to the end — at least very nearly — of my part." George leaned his head against the back of the chair, utterly weary and indifferent. "Strange to say, I'm rather glad; and it takes the keen edge off my contempt for you that it was through you that I was forced, at last, to choose."

The quiet dignity of the man forced itself upon Barton and made him fall back from him, puzzled out of his composure. Drawing up a chair in front of George he sat down in it and leaned forward, looking straight at him.

"Perhaps you have been ill and are a little out of sorts," he began, suavely. "After you pull yourself together you will be all right again. I suppose when the old man told you to come out here you thought it was all up. But it isn't — it's just beginning. We are both as safe as ever, only we've got to be a little more careful. Does the old man suspect something?"

George nodded.

"Well — we can arrange that in a day or two. It's a case of retrenching for a year or two. I suppose I got a little impatient — it was all so easy. There's no reason in the world for you to lose your nerve at this late day. Good Lord, man, you must have been through fire and brimstone before this."

"Strange to say, Barton, it has all been as smooth as oil. The situation seemed to come about of itself. All I had to do was to act the part."

"Well, can't you continue? What's the trouble?"

A flash of returning vigour swept across George's face.

"That's the trouble, Barton, I can't continue. You will take it as a joke — perhaps it is, one of the tragic jokes of life — but I have felt this weakness or strength, call it what you will, coming on ever since I took the first step. Little by little it kept growing upon me — this desire. Last night I knew it had come to stay — that I had to respond to it." He got to his feet and drew his figure up, suddenly full of the fire of energy. "Barton," he cried, his voice firm with mastery, "Barton — I am going to be honest!"

Barton leaned back in his chair and burst out laughing. "Well, my dear boy, you've made up your mind too late." Still chuckling with an amusement of which George questioned the sincerity, he went on; "I suppose you will be telling me next that now that you have gotten in with a class that never had to be dishonest, that you are — er — assimilating their ideas."

George looked at him quickly with a bright flash of appreciation.

"That's exactly it, Barton. I want to be worthy of associating with them."

"And you think that is possible," with a sneer, "after you have stolen your place among them? — while you are an impostor, a rogue, a thief — even more than you would like to make me out?"

A spasm of pain contracted George's features, and for a moment the former look of weariness lessened his energy.

"That is just it," he said slowly. "You are quite right. I am just as dirty a scoundrel as you — unless throwing the whole thing over will have some cleansing effect."

"You think you will do that?" Barton swung a leg over the arm of his chair and smiled leniently.

"I am going to do it."

Suddenly Barton's smile relaxed, and he leaned forward with a searching glance at George.

"Do you mind telling me what you are driving at — I mean, what you think you will get out of me by playing this sanctimonious role?"

"No, I don't mind telling you in the least. I was testing myself a little — and seeing, too, if you were

capable of understanding what I said. I knew you were not — but I wanted to give you the chance."

The disgust in Barton's face was growing almost beyond his control.

"So — with two years' association with this upper stratum of society, this leisure class, you have the nerve to stand there and talk to me about it? — I, a man who has known nothing else?"

George's eyes narrowed, and he finally broke into an abrupt laugh at Barton's anger. It all seemed so utterly foolish and silly to him — such a waste of valuable time.

"Yes, Barton, I know you've lived among them. But somehow I can't think you were ever a part of them — at least of the better element. However, all of us are so easily fooled. I remember the first time I saw you I thought you were the acme of everything worthy of emulation. Your voice, your manners, your clothes represented to me all that I desired — all that I was determined to have. It's rather amusing — isn't it? — but you see, I was a beginner then; I had only seen, at that time, the world of gentle breeding through books. Naturally, you were a sort of stepping-stone among my ideals. Now — I know how far down the ladder you are. All your smooth manners that I admired so much I see now are only a clever imitation of a commercial traveler's oiliness; and your clothes! Why man, I believe they are ready made!" George threw back his head and laughed with unnatural violence. "People say there are only three classes," he went on in a sudden impetus of talking, "the upper, the middle, and the dregs. But there are thousands of

others. The strata are unlimited — one mounts and mounts — eternally. And the tremendous part of it all, Barton, the part you don't understand, is, that as one mounts, the influence is not alone working on you externally,— I mean in your appearance, your manners, all the little details,— but it is working inside of you. As the body becomes better cared for, the mind becomes cleaner. One gets an irresistible desire to throw off bad thoughts, bad ideas, bad morals, with one's bad clothes. That is what I am going to do now — throw off all this filth that you cling to. I can't make it clearer to you — so there you are!"

George pulled out his watch when he had finished talking, then crossed the room to the table where his grip lay. With a quick spring Barton was beside him, grasping his arm in a firm hold. Their eyes, a few inches apart, were blazing into each other's.

"Tell me exactly what you mean," Barton commanded.

"I mean this — that I am going back to New York and give Mr. Livingstone this information. It is his property, and I am going to let him know that you are robbing him of it."

"Then you know what I shall do?"

"Naturally — I am not hoping for your silence. I don't want it."

For several moments they stood thus, their laboured breathing loud in the room. Suddenly Barton's hand tightened its hold.

"You crazy fool! — you are not going to leave this room till you get that idea out of your head. We've got to settle it here — once for all."

"It is settled — once for all."

"Then you will never see New York again."

George threw off his hand and faced him squarely.

"Are you threatening me?"

"Yes."

"You think I am afraid of you?"

"That is unimportant."

"Well," George drew a long breath and picked up his grip, "I am going to leave this room now and not promise you one little thing."

Barton fell back to the side of the table, the whole of his huge frame in a violent paroxysm of trembling. Another moment, and he had jerked a revolver from his hip pocket.

"If you move an inch towards that door," he attempted vainly to master his voice, "I shall kill you. Oh, I am desperate enough to do it now — you need not smile. Keep your distance — don't come a step nearer."

George stooped and placed his grip on the floor; rising again, he faced Barton with the old glow of magnetism in his eyes.

"It would be a rather serious thing to kill me, Barton," he said, very slowly, very deliberately; "particularly as it can do no good now. I mailed the papers to Mr. Livingstone this morning."

Suddenly, taking advantage of Barton's surprise, he sprung across the intervening space and threw himself with full force against him. A second more, and he had wrenched the pistol out of Barton's hand and sprung back across the room. For a moment he stood facing Barton, who, panting, breathless and cowed into silence, stared at him sullenly.

"You dog," George said at last, "I ought to kill you. It would be doing the world a kindness. Now — ring that bell."

Under the full mastery of George's power Barton walked across the room, pressed the button and remained standing near the door, his eyes all the time glued to George's. While they waited a knock sounded on the door, and Barton unlocked it and let the page enter. George indicated his grip and coat, and when the boy had disappeared with them, leaving the door open after him, George slipped the pistol into his pocket and at the threshold turned and faced Barton.

"Just to ease your mind for a few days," he threw back at the man who was still gazing at him with an absurdly incredible expression, "I still have those papers in my inside pocket. You have some time left yet to make any plans you may have in mind."

After he had gone, Barton looked about him helplessly; then, as if with a sudden inspiration, he rushed quickly out of the room in the direction George had taken.

CHAPTER XX

THE WAR IN HIS HEART

WHEN George boarded the train and went into the sleeper he was conscious of some one directly following him ; and when he had thrown himself into a seat and stretched his legs out to the opposite bench, he saw Barton looking at him from a section at the far end of the car. He was not surprised that the man had followed him,—indeed he had in a way anticipated such a move,—but that he should so quickly thrust his presence upon him after what he considered a final interview, caused him a moment of impatient irritation ; for he felt a great need to be alone, to isolate himself from everything that would call his attention, for even a moment, from the problem that confronted him.

His mental and physical exhaustion had reached a limit which took the keen edge from his wits and wrapped him in a stupor from which he gathered neither relief nor the strength to rouse himself. The whole wonderful change had burst upon him so suddenly, so unexpectedly culminating, that for the last twenty-four hours he had found himself with a distorted valuation of everything.

As night came on this feeling grew upon him ; objects about him began to look strange and unfamiliar ; the lights in the car grew into balls of fire ; the noise of the train roared in his ears like cannon ;—

everything was shifting and unstable. Through it all he was conscious of but one desire, and that seemed eating into his brain with the acid of impatience — an insistent longing to get back to Mrs. Livingstone. He was not in a condition to analyse this great need, accepting it without question or argument, and realising that everything else had suddenly become of no importance whatever. Her letter, which he had crushed into his pocket that morning, had become the tangible expression of this obsession, and every few moments he would grasp it with his fingers and hold to it as a man to a life line. It possessed a sort of joy for him, a mixture of pain and happiness which thrilled him when he pressed his fingers against the cool, stiff paper. It was from her, he kept repeating to himself, and it belonged to him.

He was conscious of attempting to crush out any thought of the future just yet, intuitively knowing that it could be nothing but a series of horrors to which his awakened conscience was now perfectly attuned; and, for the present, there was still need for strength to think out and carry to completion the duty before him. With the hope of a dying man, he now and then caught at wisps of thought that promised relief. Once the old misery of the days of waiting when he had given up hope of any result from his first visit cheered him; that had seemed hopeless too, and yet had been quite the other way. Could not this problem be solved? He shook his head with a spasm of pain. There was no hope now.

The alternatives stood out before him vividly, as if arranged by some clever lawyer for one side as

well as the other. Both were hopeless. There was happiness in neither of them. Only! — he sat up with a thrill at the new thought — there was happiness in one of them for her! If she never found out that he had deceived her she would be happy. But he, what would his life be, with that terrible uncertainty of discovery always hanging over him? If he should agree to become Barton's partner in crime, tying himself hand and foot with this man's power over him, could he stand it — could he live it out to the end? It would be horrible to him now that he had reached a height from which he could view himself as others did; but — could he not stand it for her sake? The excuse of using her for his *raison d'être* brought a flood of shame to him. Still — the thought insistently remained. Perhaps that was to be his punishment, — the diabolically clever torture of living an existence of shame for another's sake. Already he began to feel the joy of the agony, laying the cause of it all at her feet, knowing that the time had come when his ideal, the being who had drawn out all the good that was in him, the one who had given him his spiritual existence as surely as if she had given him the physical one, the one whom he had grown to love more than himself, took the form of his torturer, holding in one hand the sword above his head and in the other the white-hot iron.

With the light in his eyes of a man who is going to his execution and is unconscious of any external life, he rose from his seat and stretched out his arms. Then, with a quick revulsion, he raised the window and leaned out, drinking in the rush of the crisp air and gradually feeling a return of clear thought. If

that was to be the problem of his life, there was no time better than the present to begin. He drew back from the window, lowered it and went down the aisle towards Barton. As he leaned over and spoke to him, he was impressed by the care-worn, seamed face that stared back at him.

"Come back to the smoking-room — will you? I want to talk to you."

Barton was on his feet in an instant and followed George to the smoking-room, which they found empty. Taking a seat with an alertness that was characteristic of his former manner, George pulled out his cigarette case, passed it to Barton, then chose one himself. He could hardly restrain a grim smile at the mechanical response of his body to the interest of fighting out a problem with some one — a condition so widely separated from the lethargy of the last hour.

"I want to hear your arguments as to how we could keep this situation between ourselves," he began, throwing all subterfuge to the winds and striking direct at the heart of the matter. The flush of revived assurance in Barton's whole manner, the response to an opportunity to maintain the knavery of the past which lit up the handsome personality of the man, touched George with sickening disgust. He shifted his eyes to keep from showing it too plainly.

"Ah — so you've come to your senses — you are reconsidering. I thought you would." Even his voice rang with an infinite relief.

"You think we can manage it successfully?"

"If any two men in the world can — we can."

In the implied compliment George heard the far-

off sound of the whip. This, then, was the beginning; though from an unexpected direction

"Well — begin — tell me how."

Barton drew at his cigarette, narrowing his eyes a little before he began talking.

"First, as I said, we must retrench a little — for this year at least. I can even go so far as to put in something to show a gain in profits. In fact, I believe that is a good idea."

"Yes — go on."

"Then, we will let everything run along as it did formerly, until the old man is satisfied. In a year the matter of improvements can be brought up again, and then no questions will be asked."

"But this report that I must make to him now — what about that?"

"I'll make that out for you to-morrow. It's only a question of a few hours."

"And the railroad that you never built — how about that?"

"He will never know that."

"Yes — but I am supposed to have been there and seen it."

"I can't see that that makes the least bit of difference. You can say you saw it."

"Suppose, though, that he should get the idea into his head to send some one else there, just as he did me, without either of us knowing. What then?"

Barton threw away his cigarette and faced George with a frank glow of admiration.

"You know, you *are* damned clever. No wonder you've carried this game through so well. You had me bluffed to a finish back there in the hotel; ac-

tually, I thought you had turned yellow and were going to squeal, I give you my word I did. Gad, but you've got a future!" with a look of quickening envy. "I suppose the old man will set you up on Wall Street."

"You haven't answered my question," George insisted, drily.

"Oh well, it's up to you to see that nothing of that sort happens. Get him to put this investment into your hands entirely, tell him you are interested in it and want to see what you can make out of it. In fact, I have it," with a familiar slap on George's knee; "get the old fellow to give it to you. At best, it only brings him fifty thousand a year, and what's that to him?"

"It isn't his — it's Mrs. Livingstone's."

"Still better — I know you can rub the rabbit's foot over her. A man that can handle men as you do can tie women around his fingers."

"And Allston — he appears to me dangerous through his stupidity."

"Yes — but we'll have to hold on to him. Just his stupidity is his safeguard. You can't get along without stupid people — they do routine work so well. I'll manage him."

"Yet he gave me *carte blanche* yesterday."

"Which experience will teach him never to do it again."

For awhile they were both silent as the train pulled into a small town and stopped at the station. When they were again in motion, and the swirling blackness of the night pressed against the window, Barton lighted a cigar and settled back in his chair with

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the abandon of mental contentment. His eyes dwelt a long time on George, full of frank curiosity. He noted the suggestion of physical strength in his thin, clean cut figure, the negligé collar and grey tweed suit that spoke quiet style, the splendid eyes that dominated the whole and gave the force to his personality. As Barton studied him, and struggled for an understanding of his power, he felt his early fear and doubt of him rise again, for in his eyes at that moment, unconsciously intent in brooding, was the nobility of misery that struck even the dimmed moral vision of Barton. Almost without his knowledge a question rose to his lips.

"Who are you, anyhow?"

George started out of his reverie and flashed a look of frank suffering towards him.

"I don't know," he replied. "My parents were coming out here with that hoard of pioneers when they died. I don't remember them, and my aunt never told me anything about them."

"Then she was really your aunt?"

"I have no reason to think otherwise," George answered interestedly. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, for no reason. I was just thinking that you had gotten a pretty clever streak from some one."

After another half hour's silence, George suddenly leaned forward. During that time he had worked out another plan, grasping now desperately at straws of hope with which to modify the slough of depravity which seemed the portion of existence left to him.

"Barton," he began thoughtfully, revolving the

new idea before him, "your exposure means the penitentiary, doesn't it?"

Barton bit his cigar impatiently.

"Yes — just as yours."

"Well, suppose that I say that you must put back every cent you have taken from the Stone Creek mine, or I will show you up?"

Barton broke into a broad smile, then laughed outright. Once more he slapped his companion familiarly on the knee, and George, losing the keen edge of his wits in his despair, shrank back with a new horror of the exigent intimacy.

"Good enough! But after you had done that what would keep me from showing you up as you call it? No, my dear young fellow, you are clever enough, God knows, but you can't find any way of running this graft all by yourself. You've got to have me for a life partner, dislike it as much as you may. But cheer up, — there are thousands of others who'd give their heads for your opportunity. Good Lord, man, think of the future! They can't last long, either the old man or the old lady, and then you'll be literally 'it.' But see to it that they adopt you legally. I understand they haven't done that yet. After you get that fixed, then you have something to stand on. Even if they find you out after that, they'd be ashamed to expose you. Don't you see? — it's a cinch! Well" — rising and yawning — "I'm going to turn in. It has been rather a strenuous day for me. I suppose the certainty that you gave me a bad quarter of an hour will make you sleep well — eh?" He laid his hand on George's shoulder with a good-natured shake that made the

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younger fellow grit his teeth. "Good-night. Don't dream any more about trying to bamboozle me — if you please."

Left alone, George turned to the window and threw the sash up violently, anxious to clear the compartment of the depravity that seemed to have infested it through Barton's personality and their conversation. The stench of it was in his nostrils, he seemed breathing it into his whole system with the nauseating certainty that there was no possible way left to ever rid himself of it. Barton was right — he was to be his life partner from now on; a bedfellow whose foul breath was to poison the air he breathed. This, then, was a sketch of what was to follow, the foundation of the picture that was to deepen in just such corroding colours.

Another day began to outline the window. Barton, coming back to the smoking-room to dress, found George there.

"Hallo! You're up early!" Then, with a swift glance at George, "By Heaven, you don't mean to say you have been here ever since I left you?"

George looked away listlessly without replying.

"What's the matter? Have you had a bad night?" He came a step nearer, ready to lay his hand on George's shoulder. The young fellow shrank away and glared at him out of his misery.

"Don't touch me, please; I feel as if I couldn't stand it."

"Well — of course, if you are so sensitive. I only wanted to cheer you up a little. You look as if you

had been pulled through a keyhole. You haven't lost your nerve again, have you?"

George nodded. Barton threw his toilet articles on the seat and sat down by him.

"Maybe I can help you. What's gone wrong?"

George looked at him wearily, his eyes looming out of the pallor of his face, bloodshot and feverish.

"I can't go through with it — it's too much for me. I am a coward, I know, but I can't help it."

Barton stared at him through a long silence. It was clear enough to him now that George was not playing a trick on him; the signs of mental torture were too evident, and the look that had caught his attention the night before was even more pronounced in the morning light — the noble look of suffering.

"You are worn out, that's all. I have a flask here," he searched in his grip and brought it out. "Here — take this and brace up a little, then go to sleep."

"No, no," George waved him off. "I don't want a thing. That won't help me — I wish to God it would!"

George glanced up at Barton as he stood before him, the flask still held in his hand, his half-finished toilet lending an odd effect to the puzzled wonder of his face. It struck an almost humorous chord in him to see the man's helpless bewilderment.

"Well, I must admit you puzzle me. Sometimes I think you are out of your head, and then I see you are not." Barton put down the flask and began to finish dressing. "What you need is some one to pull you together and set you on your feet again. Anyhow, you've got to decide on some-

thing before we reach New York." He turned towards George again and found him staring out of the window as if he had not heard. "Did you hear me? — I say you've got to tell me what you are going to do before we get to New York."

"Oh, there will be plenty of time to decide in," George finally answered him, without looking at the face so close to his. "I'll let you know in time to get away safely. I have no desire to take it out on you."

Barton watched him in open-eyed amazement; this was another phase of the man's character that he had not counted on.

"Well — the whole thing rests with you," he resumed, after a long pause. "It's in your power to make it whatever you wish. I believe, though, that you will get your senses back in a day or two."

Suddenly George turned on him, his eyes wild and staring.

"My God, man, can't you stop talking! Can't you leave me alone for a few minutes!" he cried out. "Do you want to drive me stark mad?"

Involuntarily startled by the frightful glance flashed upon him, Barton gathered up his things and left the compartment.

The man's presence and words brought George to the end of his endurance. That the situation rested with him, he knew too well, without the need of another standing over him and drumming it into his ears. It was in his power to solve it, that is, if he had any power left. But did he? Why was he not capable and strong as he had been two years before? Then he did not hesitate for a second, but had mapped out and carried everything through with

enthusiastic cleverness. Now, such was his weakness that he would have been glad if Barton had taken the matter entirely out of his hands and told the whole story, at least the part he himself had played in it. That, anyhow, would save him the unavoidable which he saw staring at him from the end of the journey.

About noon the train drew into Chicago, leaving an interval of four hours to be passed before the departure of the fast train for New York. George, without a word to Barton, though he knew that he was not losing sight of him for a moment, pushed his way out of the crowded station to the street. As he walked along, the tingling vibration of the great city, the soft spring air, the brilliant sunshine, — all unconsciously began to strengthen him. His mind became clearer. He gradually realised that his increasing calm was enabling him to view the situation more exhaustively.

He stopped on the corner of a busy thoroughfare and watched the endless throng of rushing people, the swift passing motor cars, the crowded tramways, heavily laden trucks and steaming horses, — the relentless life of the city caring only for itself and the accomplishment of its purposes. One out of the millions was not felt there, not even known; it was all some great machine, grinding and working interminably. The scene brought to George a consciousness of his own minuteness and the littleness of his misery. It made him feel to an even greater degree the futility of what he had done and what he could do.

He turned away from his contemplation and began walking aimlessly up a wide avenue near the lake. Children were playing noisily on the pavement and enjoying to the fullest all the wonderful sunshine which had been hidden from them for so many cold, dark months. Some of the door steps were filled with pots of pale, yellowed plants which had been housed too long for their strength. A stretch of park was fresh and inviting with the first tinge of pale green showing in the trees. Birds were singing, and everywhere were laughter and smiling faces. The whole world was alive with resurrection of spring.

George turned back towards the business portion of the town. The laughter of the children jarred upon him, the sunshine struck him as hard and glaring. He stared into shop windows without seeing what he was looking at, for, during the small hours of the night, a vision had come out of the darkness and remained with him — the phantom face of one to whom he had brought, through his own weakness, the depths of suffering. He could not rid himself of the ghastly fancy that he would see the face, no matter in which direction he turned. Gradually he felt that it was getting nearer and nearer, until he heard a voice crying out to him to go on playing the impostor and not tear asunder the happiness that had been so long in coming to her. His own dull misery sank deeper and deeper as he hastened along, knowing that that cry would be with him to the end. Once he threw back his head and groaned aloud.

Waiting at a corner so as to cross a street, his wandering attention fell upon a show window, in

which was displayed an assortment of ominous-looking weapons. A new idea suddenly tightened about his heart. How easy it would be to get away from all this blazing fire of conscience — forever and ever. He put his hand back to his hip pocket and his fingers tightened on the pistol he had taken from Barton. It was with a new sense of elation that he walked on.

His mind was clear now, like atmosphere after a tempest; there was no more uncertainty, no more doubt; everything stood out sharp as crystal; his plan lay shaped before him.

Now she would not have to know that her belief in him had been misplaced; she could go on thinking that he was her child — a son worthy of her love; that would compensate for the loss, and her grief would be assuaged in her pride of what he had done. His end would be arranged so that she would think it had come about naturally. Only one thing that he wished for out of the wells of his being must remain unsaid to her — the fact that through her alone, he had found out all that was noble in him; that it was her influence which had shed the light of deep understanding upon him and made him strong enough to give up everything, even his life, rather than lead an existence of shame.

He was walking briskly now, the steady working of the plan making him straighten himself with his old assurance. The deep violet of his eyes deepened into black through the relief of the solution.

He would go to the house and see her. They would talk together for awhile. She would ask him about his trip, and he would stay long enough to see

that beautiful look again — the look of love for him. Then he would go to Mr. Livingstone and tell him everything, demanding of him, with the right of a man who is giving up everything, that she should never be told. Afterwards he would leave the house and go away to some little village where they could never know who he was, and there he would get it all over with in one moment. Then — the peace of utter, deep, endless sleep. How he yearned for it! It had never been in his grasp, always dancing before him bewitchingly, seemingly very near at times, yet fading away when he put out his hand to grasp it. Ah! He saw now that he was one of those who were created to appreciate happiness and yet never touch it. His planning led him on and on in perfecting the details, until suddenly he came to the other woman — the girl who had suffered too, and would suffer again perhaps, through the future that had seemed possible for them. His thoughts warmed towards her with the passion that had drawn them together — his mating instinct which she alone had awakened. He felt a yearning to see her again and pour out all the torture he had gone through, exonerating himself, as he felt he could, through the cleanliness of renunciation. But why argue it over and over again. Time was pressing and the end near.

A clock striking four made him hasten towards the station. Reaching the car, he ordered the porter to arrange his berth for the night, and undressing hastily, he drew down the curtains and stretched himself out in an abandon of fatigue. A few minutes later, when Barton entered the car, he was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

"BANKSTON, — where is Mrs. Livingstone?"

"She's in her room, sir. I'll go right up and tell her you are here."

How strangely things repeated themselves, George mused, as he waited in the hall amid the beautiful surroundings which had been his first introduction to this life, seemingly a hundred years ago; and now they were to be the last, too. It was the endless repetition that was the circle of life.

"She wants you to come right up to her room, sir. We were not expecting you to-day."

"No — I am back sooner than I had hoped. And Mr. Livingstone — how is he?"

"Splendid, sir. He's been down to the office every day since he got back. I haven't seen him look so well for many a day, sir." Then, with the privilege of a servant grown through years of association into almost a companion, his eyes dwelt kindly on George. "You won't mind my saying it, sir, but I can't help seeing the happiness you've brought to them. It's wonderful, sir, it certainly is."

George's features contracted as he attempted to return the smile of the old servant.

"This is her room, sir," Bankston ended, falling back a little as he reached an open door on the second floor.

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As Mrs. Livingstone came towards him with outstretched hands, the look that he had yearned for during the nightmare of the last few days struck George with an intensity of happiness that blotted out every other thought. It embraced him with its love, it wrapped him about in a mantle of affection; all the sympathy and gentleness and devotion of the world seemed glowing in the eyes that welcomed him.

This, then, was the culmination of his life — the station that every soul, on its road to Calvary, reaches. The cross of despair that had crushed him down crumbled in her presence; and as she kissed him and stepped back a little, still holding both his hands in her own, all the great love that is in every nature welled up in his eyes and spoke to her, at the same time thrilling him with a sense of purity and nobleness. He knew now what she had meant by saying that thinking of things sometimes made it true. She *was* his mother. He felt it through the instinct that never lied and which freed him from all thought of self and left him in the presence of something divine. Proofs were no longer necessary. Within him, a voice spoke and told him that it was not alone a tie of love, but a bond of blood.

For a few moments words were unnecessary.

"You are back — at last! And you did not let me know you were coming!"

"It was such a sudden decision; I did not know myself until the last moment."

"And I see you were successful; the light of victory is in your eyes. But you are tired. Yes, I see it — you cannot deny it." She released his hand and

motioned him towards a chair. "How happy Winston will be that you are back! He thought it would take you at least several weeks, — and how proud he will be of you!"

A quiver passed over George's face as her words brought back the forgotten horror; he turned towards the window to steady himself. The trees in the park opposite, in their fresh, cool greens, calmed him; and through the half-raised window the rumble of carriages, the jangle of chains, the muffled sound of hoofbeats came with the subdued hush of a life that was fading out of existence.

"You are tired — you have done too much in a short time," he heard the ineffable sweetness of her voice flowing through him like music. "You should not have overtaxed your strength. What difference does it make — after all?"

George turned from the window and sank into a chair opposite her. Suddenly something broke loose within him, and he felt himself as a little boy sitting in the presence of his mother. How odd that he had never known this sensation before! It was so carefree, so irresponsible, so deliciously childish! His smile, as he answered her, had the fresh frankness of a boy.

"I didn't really do anything."

"Ah, but I can tell by your face that you are weary. I suppose," she added lightly, "you were anxious to do your best."

George looked at her through a long silence that was perfect in its happiness.

"Do you remember that night you told me that thinking a thing made it true?" he said very slowly.

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" Somehow — just now — I am beginning to see it. You are my mother, aren't you? Why have I never known it before? — why has it been kept from me so long? I seem to be seeing now what it is. I had no idea of it before!"

" I know, you had to learn what it was, but I felt sure it would come," she answered him softly. " When I went out there, in that wild, barren country where you spent your youth, it made my heart ache to think that you had passed your boyhood in such hard surroundings. I was afraid then — I even believed it — that you would have become so hardened by it, that when we did take up our lives together, I should mean nothing to you, nor have any influence over you. Ah, how I prayed that you should learn to love me! And you do — I see it now — I see it in your eyes!"

She laid her hand on the table beside her and drew towards her a pair of small blue kid shoes. Leaning forward, she handed them to George, with a smile.

" Aren't they funny?" she said, laughing happily when she saw the puzzled look on his face. " And this little frock," she picked up a baby's dress of crumpled blue silk, slightly yellowed with age, " and this little cap. Look at them and tell me whose they were. Haven't you any suspicion of who once wore them?" she ended, looking into George's face with a bright expression, softened by a tinge of sadness.

" You mean — " he began in bewilderment.

" Yes — of course I do." She nodded happily.

" They were mine?" His hands tightened on the

folds of silk, with a far-off struggle of remembrance.
"They were mine — you say?"

"Yes — you had worn this dress the day before they took you away from me. I have always kept it near me. In a way it was all that was left to me of you for so long a time, and it grew into a part of my life. To think of a big man like you wearing a little thing like that!"

Again the struggle of something far off sounded within George, something familiar, yet beyond recall. In an effort to catch it he felt himself impelled towards Mrs. Livingstone, drawn by an inexplicable force that eased him gradually out of his chair to his knees, and, culminating with an onrush of emotion, he found himself with his head upon her knees, his body shaking with uncontrollable sobs. He was conscious now of only one word which had evolved itself into his universe, and he cried it aloud out of the depths of his being.

"Mother! Mother! Mother!"

Just outside her room, when he had torn himself away and closed the door securely between them, he sank down on the broad staircase and dropped his head in his hands, still trembling in every fiber. The memory of the scene just lived through pushed its way into his consciousness with fearful force, leaving him, not with the joy he had hoped to carry away from it, but with a picture of her wrecked life when he should be gone out of it. The fantasy of the pale, suffering face had become a reality now. Something must be done, — anything to avert the horrible catastrophe that was hanging over her.

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All thought of self had fallen from him forever now, and in this new-found strength, he knew that she must be spared. Dishonour of the vilest would be better endured than that her life should be wrecked. He was a man, strong and capable, able to stand anything; and it was his duty to lead the life of lying and deceit on to the end. He must crush out this truth that had so shaken him, force it back into the darkness as he had done once before; the old attitude would come back again, it would only be a matter of coercion and concentration; luxury and physical comforts would soon deaden the awakened conscience; it was only a matter of pulling himself together and shutting his eyes.

His expression deepened into that of some animal suffering intense pain without the faculty of expressing it; his eyes took on the look of hopeless misery; and his hands, moving restlessly across his face and hair, had that objectless activity of those who have lost the mastery of mind.

Suddenly his hand touched the pistol in his pocket, the contact bringing back, with a flash, the plan that had seemed so simple a few minutes before. Now it was worth nothing. That long, untroubled sleep, that endless Nirvana was as far off as the end of eternity.

The sound of a door closing caught his attention, then the rustle of a woman's skirt, and some voices in conversation. The voice was low and cool in its liquid tones — strangely familiar. Where had he heard it before? He must know the woman; then, quickly following the thought, came the recognition.

He stood up, suddenly resolute. Could she not

help him? Why had he not thought of going to her before? With a rush all his impressions of her flooded back, all the details of their conversations, her gestures, her steady, sad, deep brown eyes, — all the dependableness of the woman flashed before him, bringing with it the certainty that she had known him all along at his true value, even seeing before he did himself the ultimate outcome of his character. Perhaps now, hearing it in the full confession of his suffering, she could help him to find a way of bearing it. With the recklessness of desperation, he ran headlong down the stairs.

Mildred Braeme was standing before a mirror removing her hat. George stopped, when he had seen her, and waited for her to turn and see him. Her start of surprise, followed by a searching glance that drew her nearer to him, told him that he had not been mistaken in his calculations. She knew.

The flush on her face died away as she faced him.

"Something has happened — tell me — it is not Aunt Constance?"

"No — nothing has happened," George answered in a voice that struck even him as strange. "Would to God something would happen!"

Mildred fell back a step and glanced about the hall; they were alone.

"I must tell you the whole thing," George rushed on. "Where can we go?"

Mildred turned swiftly and opened the door to the front drawing-room; then she motioned George to follow her, and when he had entered, drew the heavy curtains back into place. Facing each other during a few moments of silence, George saw her lips

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tremble, then settle into a firm line. Finally he broke away from the hold of her eyes and walked down the length of the room and back again.

"Well," Mildred said, as he came back towards her, "well — tell me — I am waiting."

Seeing the fear that she made no effort to hide, George took a quick step towards her and grasped her hands. She winced at the force of his grip.

"It is a lie!" he whispered. "The whole thing is a lie. I am not their child. I am what you called me that first night we met; an impostor — a liar — a thief!"

She wrenched her hands away from him and fell back a step, silent, her eyes widening unnaturally.

"Don't you understand?" George went on, moving closer to her again. "Don't you know what I'm talking to you about? I tell you — it's all a trick I played on them. You knew there was no truth in it. Why didn't you make them see it as plainly as you did? My God! — why didn't you do it!"

Mildred still stared at him silently; then, with a quick movement of shutting out something that hurt her, she covered her eyes with her hand. A moment later she reached for a chair and leaned heavily against it.

"Well — go on," she said finally.

George moved away, her eyes following him intently.

"You did know it all along — didn't you?" he demanded vehemently, close to her again. "You knew that day in the garden — didn't you? That is what you meant?"

It seemed to him hours before she answered.

"Yes, I thought so at first," she began haltingly, "but afterwards — after we had talked together — I tried to make myself believe that I was mistaken. I wanted to believe in you — I wanted to love you; that is why I spoke to you that day of being worthy of my trust — I — I —" Suddenly she sank into the chair and began sobbing.

George stood before her with folded arms. He knew that the situation had flashed full upon her, and when her sobbing had worn itself away, he came a step nearer.

"I am glad you said that."

"Then you found the best that was in you. I knew it had to come."

George bowed his head for a moment.

"Yes — and it has brought its own punishment."

"You mean you have already told?" Mildred started up from her chair.

"No, that is the part that is torturing me. I can't tell now. I must not. I've got to go on living this life of deceit and shame, on and on — for her sake. That is, if I have strength enough left to do it."

"But Uncle Winston?"

"If he knew, do you think for a moment that he would keep it from her?"

"You are right. Yet —"

"Well?"

Mildred shifted her glance to her hands. Without looking at George she put the next question.

"Have you told me everything? I mean — is this all you have to be ashamed of — this deception?"

"It is not half."

She flinched as his words struck her.

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"Tell me the rest — tell me everything."

George hurried over the story in sharp sentences, not holding back the smallest detail of the whole scheme. Indeed, there was a measure of relief in painting it as pitilessly as possible. "Now you know," he ended, with a quick gasp of pain, "you know why I could not go on with it, don't you? You see how utterly unclean it is."

Mildred's eyes were burning into his.

"But you did not have to tell — you could have gone on."

"No, I could not go on after knowing her and you and Mr. Livingstone. I could not — try as hard as I might."

"I mean, though, that it was your choice not to — that Barton would be glad to have it continue?"

"Naturally — it's his ruin. Of course he does not want me to give in."

"Ah — that is what I wanted to know — that it was your own choice — out of your own free will!"

George stared down at her, uncomprehending. The pallor had gone from her now, and in its place was a flush that made her beauty glowing, warm, gorgeous; and in her eyes burned a brilliance that stirred him out of himself. Very quietly she rose from the chair and took a step towards him and laid both hands on his shoulders.

"I know I love you now; and if everything else fails — I am willing to go with you. We can build up the ends together — we can begin all over again!"

The depths of understanding flashed from one to the other, and for a moment the strong flood of

sympathy united them; then George turned away from her.

"But it's not of ourselves," he said, with a return of his misery. "It is of her that we must think."

"Yes — I know; but it was your love for her that did all this for you."

"But can that keep me from telling him? It does not make me less guilty, less a man to be despised."

The strength of her noble smile, as she looked at him, brought the first sensation of comfort that he yet felt.

"You don't see yet — but you will some day. That has saved you."

The muffled sound of a door closed came to them through the heavy curtains; then Mr. Livingstone's voice, giving some directions to Bankston, and afterwards footsteps dying away as he went up the stairs.

"You must tell him," Mildred said quickly.

George started back.

"But it is risking her happiness. If he told her, there would be only one thing left for me to do."

"What?"

He jerked the pistol out of his pocket.

"Give it to me!" she said, suddenly very calm.

George stepped back from her and slipped the pistol into his pocket.

"No, Mildred, you think I am stronger than I am. I should have to end it if he told her."

"Even so — your life must go on." Her forced calmness showed signs of deserting her. "For me — you would have to go on with it. I would do my best to help you; I believe I could."

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"No," he shook his head slowly, firmly, "that would make me more miserable than ever. Do you think I could stand seeing the reproach always in your eyes? Perhaps you would try not to show it — but I should see it there, always, — always. Do you remember once you said I would be a murderer?"

She rushed to his side.

"Hush! I hear some one coming!" She clung to him for a minute while they heard Mr. Livingstone come down the steps and go into the library. "Now," she said, drawing away from him and going towards the door, "now is the time. Go to him and tell him everything. Don't keep back the least thing, — tell it to him exactly as you have told it to me. Try to be steady. Don't let your emotion get the better of you, and don't be afraid to make everything bare. Then tell him," her voice began shaking violently, "tell him of your love for Aunt Constance that brought the change — the thing that made truth a necessity."

George followed her to the door, then drew back; throwing out his arms, he crushed her against him, trembling with a certainty that had tightened about his heart.

"If I fail — good-bye."

She freed herself with a struggle.

"When you have told him everything," she whispered, ignoring his words, "don't wait for his answer, — come back here to me. I shall be waiting for you."

George gradually felt the force of what she was struggling towards, and the dim hint of her purpose began to take form before him.

" Ah — I think I see now what you mean !"

" Then do it well. You know how ; you have it in you to force your power wherever you wish ; you did it for yourself once. Now do it for her — and for me !"

He held her eyes steadily, gathering from her the strength of belief ; then very, very slowly his head went up, his figure drew itself together and his eyes deepened into the glow of battle.

" Now — I see you can," Mildred cried, pushing him towards the door. " Go — go quick !"

She watched the curtains fall together and shut off the sound of his footsteps as he passed across the hall ; then, in the stillness of the empty room, she knelt down before a chair and clasped her hands in prayer.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TRUTH AT LAST

GEORGE walked across the hall, opened the library door without knocking, closed it softly after him, and stood surveying the room.

It was exactly as he remembered it the first time he had entered there, except that now there was no fire roaring up the chimney, and the sunlight replacing the lamplight changed the perspective and gave a more somber effect to the walls of books. The table was filled as formerly with an inconglomerate mass of newspapers and leather-bound books. The bronze bust on its verde antique pedestal loomed out of the shadows, and Mr. Livingstone was seated in the same chair, almost in the same position. Standing there a few moments, unseen, George felt a flood of emotion surge through him, bringing back vividly all the details and sensations of that first meeting, when he, a poor, blind, ignorant young fellow had stood on the brink of an abyss to which his eyes had just now been opened.

The vision sapped the strength that he had forced back into existence so that it was with a violent effort that he concentrated his will once more and stepped forward, calling Mr. Livingstone by name.

The older man rose quickly and grasped George's hand, his face glowing with pleasure, his eyes full of anticipation. He looked more vigourously alive,

more alert and robust than George had ever seen him.

"Constance told me you had come," he said, a tone deeper than cordiality in his voice. "Why didn't you telegraph me? — and how did you get back so soon? Wasn't Allston there?"

George turned from his glowing glance and pushed a chair closer to the table, realising, with a sickening dread, that all the same questions had to be gone through with once more. He sat down heavily and leaned back in the chair.

"Yes — Allston was there — Barton, too."

Mr. Livingstone looked at George sharply, quick to detect the subtle difference in his manner which lent an air of indifference to his last words.

"What is the matter? You don't appear to be very much interested in the subject. I thought you would come back full of it. Did anything go wrong?"

He stood before the chair in which George sat, looking down at him.

"No — I think you will be satisfied with what I have done," George answered, struggling to maintain the strength which Mildred's words had given him. "It's rather a tiresome trip from there here. You know I only arrived this morning. Barton came back with me."

He still expressed himself in rambling phrases, all the time attempting to steady himself and yet feeling the utter uselessness of it when he met Mr. Livingstone's intent gaze. At last the older man's voice, a shade sharper than before, roused him.

"How did it happen that Barton was there? I

particularly wanted you to get your information without his assistance. I thought I made that clear to you before you left. Do you think he could have known anything about your going out there?"

"No, I'm quite sure he did not know," George answered, nerving himself with the last effort to grasp the subject before him. "He did not arrive until the second day after me."

"Then you had two days with Allston before he arrived?"

Mr. Livingstone sat down opposite George, his face alive with the expression of the shrewd business man, all interest in the subject under discussion.

"Yes — only I did not need more than a few hours in which to get all of the information."

"There was no necessity for haste. Why didn't you take it more leisurely? You probably would have been more thorough in your investigations if you had taken a week."

"No — there you are mistaken," George replied quickly, his eyes gradually lighting up. "What I accomplished had to be done before Barton arrived. You see I knew he was coming. Allston wanted me to wait for his arrival, but I refused. I knew I had to get all my information before he came — if I wanted to control the situation."

George met Mr. Livingstone's eyes, which were glowing now with a tinge of excitement.

"You seem to distrust the man. Have you any reason for this?"

"Yes — I had known him before."

"I know — but for a very short time — a few months, wasn't it?"

"That was quite long enough."

Mr. Livingstone started up from his chair at the pregnant words.

"You never told me that before."

George held up his hands. "Please listen to me to the end," he said. "I haven't told you half of it yet. When I finish there will be nothing left unsaid."

Mr. Livingstone sank back in his chair, the whole of his handsome personality alert and watchful. For a second George felt the old desire struggle within him that he might have had such a father as this man; then, following with a contraction of the muscles of his face, came the overpowering hopelessness of retaining even the semblance of that relation which the past two years had made possible. In the grip once more of his misery, he dropped his face in his hands, — Mr. Livingstone thought it was a gesture of fatigue, — and when he looked up again, the old man's eyes were softer and more affectionately glowing upon him.

"I told Allston it was not important — the mission you had sent me on," George rushed on into the heart of the subject, feeling that anything was better than this sympathy. "I had to do that to keep from arousing his suspicions."

"You suspected him, too?"

"He was a little difficult at first, but at last I convinced him it was a very small matter, and in that way got hold of everything."

"You mean —" Mr. Livingstone was on his feet again.

"That you have been systematically robbed of thousands and thousands of dollars."

"That is a very broad statement," Mr. Livingstone flushed darkly. "You have proofs? Can you substantiate what you have said? It is of no value otherwise."

George pulled a large envelope from his inside pocket and threw it on the table between them.

"There are the proofs," he said, tapping the heavy envelope.

"You must explain it to me at once. We must not lose one minute." He tapped a bell on the table. "Tell Mrs. Livingstone we shall not be ready for luncheon for a while," he said, when Bankston had entered the room. "If she prefers, tell her not to wait for us." Turning back to George he picked up the envelope and broke the seal. "Now — start at the beginning and do not leave out anything — it is important that you should be as accurate as possible."

An hour later the two men sat facing each other enveloped in a long silence. Mr. Livingstone held the envelope in his hand, ceaselessly turning it over in his nervous fingers, and regarding it with an intensity that spoke no other interest at that moment. George looked at him through the calm that had come to him with the knowledge that the end was very near. Only a few minutes more now and everything would be finished. He had carefully laid out before Mr. Livingstone the full plan of the robbery, nothing had been overlooked, and with the completion of the *exposé* the silence had come. There was nothing more to be said on that subject. There only remained the truth about himself.

As the full meaning of what remained came to George, he felt himself relaxing from the strain of the past hour, and looking across at the old man with a warm flow of sympathy. His eyes deepened into deep violet and softened with a last moment of yearning. It seemed a long time to him before Mr. Livingstone looked up and met his gaze.

The old man saw the look in George's eyes and mistook the meaning.

"George," he said, rising and laying one hand affectionately on his shoulder, "I have worn you out by keeping you here all this time talking business when you show you are exhausted; but we are through now — for a while anyhow. Suppose we call the others and have luncheon."

George sat motionless with the touch of the hand on his shoulder growing more terrible each moment. He kept silent a little while longer, attempting to frame a sentence, and while he waited Mr. Livingstone stood beaming down upon him.

"You will never know how proud I am of you," he continued. "I feel now that you could not have done more to satisfy me completely if I had been training you all the years you were separated from me. You have made me feel the right you have to claim anything from me. You have given me the desire that not every father in the world has — the wish to go out into the world and point to you before every one and say, 'That is my son.'"

George shook his hand violently from his shoulder and sprang up, trembling from head to foot.

"Don't say that! For God's sake, don't! It makes it all the more horrible for me!"

Mr. Livingstone fell back from him, staring blankly.

"What do you mean, boy?" he began, almost soothingly.

George stood the length of the rug from him, in the same place, almost the same attitude in which he had first spoken his lies and heard the walls of books sneering at him. They did not sneer now, and the knowledge that he would soon stand before them, self confessed, with a clean conscience to silence them, with truth to steady him, gave him a measure of comfort, the outward expression of which became dignity.

"I have told you all I know of Barton and Allston, except the way in which I came to find it out. A month before I came here to you I was in the office one evening when they were both there, in the next room, and through the doors I heard the first discussion of this robbery. Listening to them with the feeling that it would be self-protection to know what they were saying — for I was honest in those days — I heard Barton tell Allston the story of your lost child. Later that night I found a newspaper clipping that Barton had dropped on the floor and which I brought to you. I heard Barton say that there was enough resemblance in me to your wife to pass myself off as your child. I fought the temptation — I wavered for a while — then I resisted no longer. That is all! I tried to keep from telling you — but I could not — I could not! My God! — I have told you now! I—"

He moved towards the chair and threw himself into it, with no strength of body or mind left. With

the last cry of his torture had come a great relief, leaving him helpless yet wonderfully peaceful. It was all over now. He had done the one thing possible.

The viselike grip of a hand upon his arm made him look up into Mr. Livingstone's face. It was white, haggard, and very, very old; and in his eyes was the violence of fury.

"You say you are not my child — that it was all a trick?"

George nodded. The grip on his arm was beginning to pain him, and with it came a sense of relief that some one was doing something. Heretofore it had been nothing but words upon words; now, a physical suffering seemed to allay for a moment the mental fire.

"You are not lying this time."

Their faces were a few inches apart.

"Ask Barton," George gasped.

The grip on his arm relaxed, and Mr. Livingstone moved away from him. In another moment he had tapped the bell.

"Telephone Mr. Barton to come here at once," he said to Bankston. "You know his number. I suppose he is at his office? — or has he already gone?" He turned to George with the last question.

"He said he would wait at his club till he heard from me. I left him there on my way here."

"Ring him up there, Bankston, and tell him to come at once."

When they were alone, Mr. Livingstone turned back to George.

"So you are partners in crime, are you?"

George closed his eyes from the searching intensity of the other's, and he was sitting thus when he heard a startled cry; "Great God! — Constance!" and starting up, he saw the old man sink into a chair and lean heavily across the table, his face buried on his arms.

George watched him a minute, noting the convulsive shake of his body; then, with sudden determination, he went towards the door. It was not until then that he had remembered Mildred. If she could do anything, this must be the time. He walked noiselessly by the table and out of the room.

In the drawing-room she was waiting for him, and came towards him with a rush, her face blurred in tears.

"It has been an eternity!" she cried. "Tell me — what does he say?"

George looked at her across the gulf of oncoming separation.

"If you can help him — go to him. Don't think of me!"

Mildred understood the look and trembled.

"You have told him everything?"

George nodded.

"You kept back nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"And you told him the reason for your confession? You told him it was through your love for her?"

"No — I did not tell him that. It would have done no good."

"No good?" Mildred cried aloud. "You don't know what you are saying! It is everything! Where is he now?"

George nodded towards the library.

"In there," he said. "I left him there. He has sent for Barton. Mildred — try to make it easier for them. Let them know in some way that it was through them that I found myself." He took her hands in his and pulled her towards him. "Good-bye!"

She struggled out of his embrace, holding his hand tight in her own, and pulling him towards the door. When they had crossed the hall together and stood before the half-open door, he wrenched his hand out of her grasp.

"There is no need there now for me. You go in alone. I cannot go through it all again."

Her eyes blazed into his, full of scorn.

"Ah — I see, then you *are* a coward. You can fight for yourself — but when the time comes to battle for another, you have no strength left!"

"It isn't that — you are wrong. It is hopeless. You must see, don't you?"

"Then you are willing that she should suffer."

"No — no — no — ! Go on — do what you wish — I shall follow you!"

CHAPTER XXIII

FOR HER SAKE

WHEN Mildred had closed the door back of them, she motioned George towards a chair in one of the corners of the room; then she went to Mr. Livingstone's side and laid her hand on his shoulder. He was still in the position in which George had left him, his head sunk forward on his arms; and while George slipped into the chair and looked at the two people who were to battle there before him for his future, he got the idea that he was looking on at some event builded around another man than himself; indeed, he felt now that the end of his efforts had come, and that from henceforward he would be a mere puppet in the hands of those two, doing their bidding, dancing when they pulled the wires, repeating the words they should put into his mouth.

Several minutes dragged by. A deep-toned clock chimed two through the closed doors. Still Mildred had not spoken, — still the old man leaned forward, motionless and silent.

Finally Mildred shifted her hand from his shoulder to his head and began softly moving it to and fro caressingly.

"It is I, Uncle Winston," she began, leaning closer so that her words were barely a whisper.

A restless movement came from Mr. Livingstone; until then, the only acknowledgment of her presence.

"I have come to talk to you, Uncle Winston," she continued, after a pause. "I know everything."

The old man raised his head suddenly, the haggard expression of his face startling Mildred into a low exclamation. Every year of his life seemed to be written upon his features in ineradicable lines. Without speaking, he stared at her through the eyes of suffering.

"Yes — I know everything," Mildred repeated in answer to the mute question.

"And Constance?" — his first words.

"No — she does not know."

For a second a look of relief flashed across his features, dying away as quickly and leaving his face more drawn and miserable than before.

Mildred leaned against the arm of his chair, her hand once more seeking his shoulder.

"She must never know, Uncle Winston," she said, her voice struggling through uncertainty to sound firm and clear.

"It will kill her — it will kill her — she can't stand it — I know that — I know it too well!" he cried aloud in his agony. "Yet — there is no way out of it — it means the end of everything for her — and for me! Great God! — I could kill him. It is my right, too." Suddenly he sat upright. "Where is he? — Don't let him get away from me!"

"He is not going away, Uncle Winston. He is still here." Mildred attempted to make her voice soothing.

"Did he tell you himself?" Mr. Livingstone looked at her quickly.

"Yes — just before he came in here."

"Why did he tell you?"

"Because he wanted me to ask you to do something for him."

"Let him go free — I suppose! Never! He shall suffer as he has made me suffer — as he will make Constance suffer. He can expect no mercy from me. And if she cannot stand it, if it is too much for her, I shall surely kill him!"

"Hush, Uncle Winston — you don't know what you're saying. I think he has suffered, too — and will now all his life. What he wants you to do will accomplish that to the fullest. Ah, it will be the refinement of torture — it will —"

"What are you talking about?"

Mildred drew her breath sharply and looked away. The moment had come to say it.

"He wants me to keep you from telling Aunt Constance. It is the only thing he asks of you — that she shall never know. If you will do that — he will do anything that you say, go anywhere you wish him to."

"As if he cared if she knew!" Mr. Livingstone broke in harshly. "What difference could that make to such a man as he — such a scoundrel? What object is back of it? Don't you see? Have you, too, lost your senses? It's the strongest card he has — he is playing that now for his own salvation."

Mildred did not answer at once, turning away for a moment with hands clasped, her head a little forward in deep thought. It was too crucial a moment not to choose her words carefully, and she struggled

silently for the right expressions, realising that in them lay success or ruin.

"Have you thought, Uncle Winston, why he should have told you what he did?" she asked, quietly.

"Because he had to. Because the others had found him out. There was nothing else to do."

"There were a great many other things that he might have done. Don't you see? He could have run away and never come back — they did not compel him to come here and tell you. It would only mean their ruin for you to know about the robbery. He could have gone on in partnership with them as he has for the last two years if he had wanted to; indeed, that is what they wanted. It is all very clear to me. He has lost everything himself in making them lose. Don't you understand? Don't you know what is back of it all? Think a moment. You are bound to see!"

Mr. Livingstone's head sank forward in deep thought as Mildred's words struck him, puzzling him at first and opening up new channels of vision.

"No — it was not necessary for him to come back," she went on calmly as she saw the effect of her words.

"Did he tell you that Barton had insisted on retrenching, putting back what he had stolen so as to deceive you again, so as to allay your suspicions for a while, so that the coming years would be all the richer for them? Then, if he had agreed, he could have gone on with us all in the newly assured position. It would have been ridiculously easy."

"Yes, yes. But why did he not tell me of their

robbery at first? If he had had any sense of honour he would have done that at the beginning."

"He could not then. It would have meant the failure of his own problem. You see — Barton knew his hold on you."

"And does not what he did do make him even worse than Barton? Is not robbing a woman of happiness a thousand times worse than stealing all the money in the world?"

Mildred trembled as she listened to his argument. It was so true, so unanswerable, that she felt the foundations of her conviction slipping from under her. With a supreme effort she gathered her wavering forces.

"He did not know what he was doing when he first came to you. In his ambition, the opportunity that had flashed upon him swept away every thought except that it was his great chance — the greatest he would ever have. In his blindness he fell, thinking of no one but himself, never once realising what it might lead to, that it might make others suffer. None of us see consequences in our moments of temptation; everything sinks into the delirium of the moment itself. It is hardly even human to resist at such times. You have had such moments — so have I — so has every one. And though there are great differences, some being trained to resist, others lacking a true valuation of right and wrong, still the sin is measured by the resisting strength of the offender — not by the crime itself. With him it was the blindness of egoism; the same thing that blinds you, Uncle Winston, and what has blinded me for so long a time."

Suddenly her voice broke, and she grasped the back of the chair for support. If she could only have strength to go on, she kept repeating to herself, there would still be some faint hope.

"It is not his idea to save himself through Aunt Constance's love," she went on. "He had planned everything differently until I showed him there was still a greater duty before him than that of killing himself." With a flood of renewed strength she felt the old man start at her words. "I told him that his only duty now lay in living this out for Aunt Constance's sake. It was through her that it came to him. It must be through her that it shall be maintained. Do you know that her love brought the truth of the whole thing to him — that through the eyes of love — her eyes — he found himself? It has been coming ever since he first saw her, gradually, little by little, and when he came back from Europe I think I was the first to see it — when I came upon him one night in the library. He had been talking to her, and the change was so noticeable that I felt it at once; after that, I have been eagerly watching and waiting. The awakening has been going on steadily until everything culminated in the incidents of the last week, when he stood face to face with the final choice of good or bad."

Mildred crossed from the chair and leaned against the table, her face glowing with returned colour, her eyes luminous.

"And he has chosen, Uncle Winston," she cried, "he has conquered through her love for him! — a love which has made nothing but dishonour possible!"

With her standing before him in the steadfast

confidence which gave her a compelling force, the old man felt himself drawn out of himself and towards her. Looking at her squarely, he felt a quiver of relief in the nobility of her glance.

"What do you mean by all of this, Mildred? What good can come from all you have said? What is it leading to?"

"To the greatest good, if you will only see it as I do."

"You mean —"

"I mean that you must accept him as your son. He is worthy of it."

Mr. Livingstone gripped the arms of his chair with sudden vehemence.

"You are raving! Accept a man who is an impostor — a thief? What are you thinking about? Do you think I could ever have a shred of confidence in him again?"

"Have you reason to think your trust in him was misplaced?" she answered steadily. "Did you not send him out West to investigate your property? Has he not done it better than you could have hoped — beyond all your expectations? Has he failed you in the very least? Can there ever be a severer test than this one? Can one be more worthy of confidence than when he tells the truth at the cost, almost, of his life?"

Once more the old man's head was lowered to his breast. It seemed now that Mildred had struck a note that was unanswerable. The silence deepened about them.

Finally Mr. Livingstone spoke, his words low and uncertain and irresolute.

"It can't be, Mildred! It can't be!"

Suddenly she knelt down and put her arms about him.

"It *must* be, Uncle Winston. Nothing else is possible now. We must risk everything for Aunt Constance's sake. She is not strong enough to stand the shock of this revelation — you know that as well as I. She would never get over it. It is not noble of you not to wish to protect her — not to do the one thing that will save her life. You need her — so do I; what would our lives be without her? And it is with us — the decision. In him lies our only hope, for she loves him — she loves him!"

In a tight embrace she clung to him, the tears rushing down her cheeks as she felt a responsive thrill from him. In the quickening that had come to him she knew that he was clinging to her and what she had said like a man in a death struggle; and knowing this she let her sobs speak for her, until the sound of a sharp knock on the door brought them out of their battle.

Mildred and Mr. Livingstone rose to their feet. George sprang from the chair and faced them. The moment was full of snapping suspense as each one sought the other's eyes. Then Mr. Livingstone drew himself up, while Mildred still clung to his arm.

The knock was repeated.

"Come in," Mr. Livingstone called out, his voice breaking on the still room with a metallic sound.

"Mr. Barton to see you, sir," Bankston said.

"Bring him here," came Mr. Livingstone's prompt response.

"You must let me stay," Mildred pleaded.

"Yes — I want you to hear it out to the end; and you, too," he added, flashing a look upon George.

George made a slight movement forward so that when Barton entered the room he was confronted by their concentrated gaze. The man's appearance spoke his condition plainly; his face looked careworn, his heavily lined features giving him the appearance of dissoluteness. He stopped near the door and faced the three people, while a strange expression of uncertainty flashed across his face; then, with evident concentration, he walked resolutely towards Mr. Livingstone and held out his hand.

"We can dispense with formality, Barton," Mr. Livingstone said, withholding his hand.

Barton's look of greeting changed, and he gave George a swift look of interrogation. Receiving nothing in answer but a blank expression, he shifted his look to Mrs. Braeme and then came slowly back to Mr. Livingstone.

"I don't understand," he said finally. "I received a telephone message saying you wanted me to come here at once. Was there a mistake?"

Mr. Livingstone drew his arm from Mildred's grasp and went forward to Barton, looking him squarely in the eyes.

"Barton," he said slowly, painfully distinct, "is what this man has told me true?" He indicated George with a nod of the head.

Barton's face went ashy and his mouth trembled so that for a moment he seemed unable to speak.

"No — he is all wrong," he said at last. "I

told him Allston had given him incorrect information. I can prove it to you satisfactorily. All the proofs he has are false. I — ”

“ I’m not talking about that part of it, Barton. What I want to know is if what he has told me about himself is true?”

Barton took a step back and riveted his gaze on George, silently demanding some key as how to proceed. Mr. Livingstone’s words had taken the assurance out of him and left him entirely without a clue as to what had been said and done. Waiting a few moments for George to speak, and getting no reply, he turned back to Mr. Livingstone.

“ What did he tell you?” he asked.

“ Everything.” George’s voice came across the room, low and vibrant. “ The newspaper clipping — my whole scheme — all of our plans — your overtures to me to continue — everything.”

Barton listened motionless. Then, when George had finished, he glanced furtively towards the door and backed in that direction. George noticed this before the others, and with two strides had blocked the way.

“ All that he has told you about himself is true,” Barton cried, his voice loud in his fury as he saw all sides pressing down upon him. “ All the rest is a damned lie! I can prove it!”

“ That is enough,” Mr. Livingstone said. “ We can dispense with any further comment from you. I shall take up your part of this affair to-morrow.” He put out his hand and supported himself against the chair. “ Just one moment, though,” he held up his hand; “ I know this — that the information

I have against you is amply proven. These papers are enough to convict any man to the penitentiary." He pointed to the envelope George had brought back with him. "If you value your freedom, what you know about this man had better be guarded as the gravest secret of your life. You understand?"

Barton's eyes swept the three faces in stunned amazement; then he bowed to Mr. Livingstone and went swiftly out of the room, leaving the door open behind him.

When he was gone, Mr. Livingstone strode across the room and back again, his hands clasp- ing and pulling apart in the excitement to which he seemed to have given himself over entirely. Suddenly he stopped before George.

"Now — go! I have saved you from disgrace — I am going to let you go. If there is anything in you I think you will suffer your own punishment. No — don't speak — I don't want to hear anything you have to say — there is nothing to say. All I want to know is that you are out of my sight forever!"

Without a word, after the repulse of the first effort, George moved towards the door, looking straight before him and not wavering in the slightest. When he was near the threshold Mildred made a swift rush to his side and put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Uncle Winston!" she cried incisively, turning to face Mr. Livingstone. "This will be the end — you don't know what you are doing!"

"Yes, Mildred," he spoke with deliberate emphasis, "I know — better than you. It might go

on well enough while you and I are here with Constance to protect her from him — to guard her. But if I should die — if something should happen to you — if she were left, in some way, in this man's power — what do you think would become of her? No — it is impossible! For her own sake she must know!"

"Stop!"

George's voice rang out so loud, so sharply penetrating, that Mr. Livingstone and Mildred wheeled about and saw Mrs. Livingstone already in the room.

She had paused just inside the door and stood staring at Mr. Livingstone, her eyes wide open in terror. Trembling violently as if she would fall at the first step, she looked straight at her husband during a short silence in which the naked passions of each one seemed to surge out and fill the room with the cry of a thousand voices. Then, without taking her eyes from him, the bluish pallor of her face already that of despair, she came unsteadily towards him.

"Winston!" her voice came like a far-off whisper, "Winston! Were you speaking of him? Did you mean George?" She waited a second while Mr. Livingstone stared at her silently. Suddenly she turned and saw George, and gathering the little strength left to her, she raised her hand and motioned to him. "Come here, my boy — come here." Then, as George stood silent, "You will not? Ah — Winston!" one hand went out towards the chair and clung to it, while she covered her eyes with the other, "then — it is true!" Her voice broke, and she sank into a chair.

Mildred, with a swift movement, was beside Mr. Livingstone.

"You see — now!" she whispered. "Save her!"

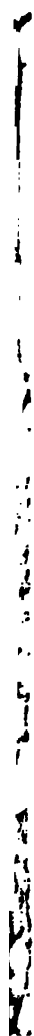
The old man, motionless, staring at his wife as if in a dream, gradually drew himself together and crossed the room to her side. Kneeling down beside her chair, he slipped his arm about her.

"Constance," he said gently, his voice struggling to master its full of misery and torture and hopelessness, "Constance, my dear, you are making a mistake. You did not understand, did you, that I was speaking of Mr. Barton. We have found him to be unworthy of our confidence."

She lifted her face quickly and stared at him; then very, very slowly, a smile curved her lips and her eyes grew brilliant with a look of joy and relief. To the three who waited she had never seemed so beautiful as at that moment. Then, as if moved by some instinct, she rose quickly from the chair and went towards George with outstretched arms.

"My boy — my boy!" she cried, and with the appeal there was a note of triumph in her voice. "Will you ever forgive me? It was not my doubt of you — it was only my fear! Forgive me!"

THE END



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L. C. Page & Company's
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